



LITERARY CRAFTSMANSHIP  
AND APPRECIATION



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AND APPRECIATION

*by*

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LONDON  
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD  
MUSEUM STREET

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1934

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
UNWIN BROTHERS LTD , WOKING

TO

*The Memory of*

*My Friend*

J D BLATCHLEY HENNAH



# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
<i>Introduction</i>	11
I On Observation	15
II On Writing the Essay	27
III On Revising the Essay	48
IV On Description	86
V On Humour	99
VI On the Writing of Letters	120
VII On the Writing of Narrative. I	135
VIII On the Writing of Narrative. II	150
IX. On the Writing of Verse	171
X. On Reading Books	196
XI On Poetry and Appreciation. I	213
XII On Poetry and Appreciation. II	233
<i>Appendices</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	277





## INTRODUCTION

APPRECIATION is one of the most important things in life. That is my excuse for writing this book. It is as long a struggle to learn to read with full enjoyment as to learn to write clearly and well. "Pour réussir dans les belles lettres," I once read in an old book on Composition, 'il faut avoir du génie, au moins du talent ou de l'esprit, de l'imagination, de la sensibilité et du goût.' But it is possible to enter the battle equipped with scarcely any of these admirable qualities. The virtues that really count in the writing of English are sincerity and enthusiasm.

William Blake once characteristically remarked that no man incapable of creating something—in music, art, or literature—could be a Christian. Appreciation is in itself something of a creative art and the attempt to write, if it only shows how hard are the simplest things, is the straightest road towards it.

My object here has been to approach English Literature from the creative side. I have not attempted, and could not attempt, to show How It Is Done. That no one quite knows. "If poetry come not as naturally as the leaves to a tree," says Keats, "it had better not come at all." I have only put up signposts before a few of a thousand pathways. There are no real rules, no final court of appeal, in the writing of English. "The Golden Rule is that there is no Golden Rule." One is only a member of a band of adventurers on a voyage of discovery over lands that have been but roughly charted. We are all marching through a jungle, and no one has a map only some have been cutting down trees longer than others, and can here and there give a little help. The

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

critic's business—if critics have any business here at all—is not so much to explain as to introduce, to stimulate to make M Jourdain conscious that he has not only been speaking prose, but even writing it all his life. But excess of zeal is apt to destroy. When Godwin's wife was lying on her death-bed, she murmured ecstatically, "Oh, I am in heaven!" "No, my dear," replied the philosopher gravely, "you merely mean that your physical sensations are somewhat easier." Dogmatism is the darkest pitfall that awaits anyone who deals with the art of writing. Every "law" made by the critic is broken by genius, and between the rules of the one and the whims of the other the gentle reader stands bewildered. It is only when he tries to write himself that he discovers that the medium in which he deals makes its own laws when occasion demands.

The real danger seems to be that the writing and reading of English may become an academic thing, remote from life. So much that is modern is machine-made, ephemeral, without future or background. But enjoyment is the first essential of education. It is only the rare minority who become classical scholars, and before a real enjoyment of dead languages is attained, the dead languages have got to be made alive. The old idea of "elegance" and "correctness" in writing, so emphatically stated by Dryden (who had not himself learnt very successfully to manage the relative pronoun), belongs to the dead languages. But the writer of English is dealing with a living language, changing from day to day, inconstant as water: a language that can only be employed in a spirit of ceaseless curiosity and experiment. Pronunciation and vocabulary, idioms and styles alter as frequently as the fashions in dress. It is essential to keep in view this fluidity of the language, to make it clear that we

## *Introduction*

deal with no static thing, but are experimenting with something profound, incalculable, and alive. Each man makes for himself his own vocabulary, the words he uses and the phrases he fashions will take their colour from his mind. And no one can write well unless he is conscious of this genius of language—a spirit that cannot be analysed or hemmed round with dogma.

It is hard enough to suggest methods of making some subjects live, but in English the learner should be able to realize that the subject is experimental, that (like Science) while there is a certain amount to be demonstrated, there remains a very much greater amount to be discovered. Once the land has been mapped and charted, its romance is gone, and in Cathay no longer do the milk white peacocks walk the palaces of the Cham, or the golden birds dance at his table. It is exactitude which makes a modern map so much less attractive than the old charts with their spouting whales and treasure chests.

The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders.

And it is this which has killed the Classics—the feeling that the languages, being dead, remain rigid and circumscribed and have ceased to grow—that there is a certain amount to be learnt, and beyond that a barrier. That is what is called the Depression of the Fact. There can be no theories about the ablative singular of Dux, there are a hundred theories about the versification of Swinburne or the character of Hamlet.

“There are two duties incumbent upon any man who enters upon the business of writing,” says Stevenson,<sup>1</sup>

*Fortnightly Review* April 1881

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

“truth to fact, and a good spirit in the treatment.” Sincerity, “truth to fact,” is a virtue not to be imparted; the object of this book is to help towards that “good spirit in the treatment” which a writer can only fully acquire by a constant delight in the changing and multiple beauties of his medium

# LITERARY CRAFTSMANSHIP AND APPRECIATION

## I

### ON OBSERVATION

I SHALL never forget the first time I ever really observed a cow. I stood behind it, I remember, as it lay upon the grass, absorbed in the lingering process of digestion, and I noticed how the great barrel of a body narrowed down to an attenuated spike. But it was when I went round and looked into its face that I really observed the cow. The thing was a monster. The huge mouth twitched in a diabolic sneer, the eyes rolled and glared, the head receded from a snout like the snout of a mammoth. It reminded me of all the old, terrific fairy tales, where the ordinary becomes suddenly the unfamiliar, where the prince changes into a crimson frog, or where the wolf turns in an instant to a beautiful maiden. I stood face to face with a prehistoric beast, a creature I had seen a hundred times and observed but thus once. Sight is merely retaining a mental picture of an object, observation means not only sight but insight. It means turning suddenly round some forgotten corner of the brain, and coming on things from a new angle.

Chesterton has told, in one of his essays, of a child who, confronted for the first time with the sea, remarked that it looked like a field of cauliflowers. This is so essentially natural that it sounds almost literary. It is so true that one suspects it of being the result of long and careful thought.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Yet, curiously enough, it really is the sort of remark that children do make. The child has this advantage over the cultivated man—that he finds it so much easier to be sincere. He is closer to earth, I suppose, and therefore closer to the poetry of earth, and has not to rid himself of a cloud of associations and other men's ideas before he sees things as they are. We lose, as we grow older, this power of observation. When a small child sees a train, it is not affectation that he should see it as a dragon with eyes of flame and a mane of flying smoke, it is not because he is trying to be clever that he finds a station—that haunt of strange fires and magic caverns—the most romantic place in the world. It is because childhood has the gift of Wonder, and that is why childhood has always been revered, and that is what poetry really means. To a literary man the moon might suggest anything; it might suggest scarlet lilies, as it did to Pater, or a woman rising from the tomb, as it did to Wilde. But a small boy I once knew described the full moon, just rising clear and luminous in the sky, as a bubble with a flame inside.

Such a remark is astonishing, not because it is either particularly true or particularly vivid, but because it approaches the familiar from a new angle—reminding one of the attitude of Laurence Sterne's tailor (that mute, inglorious Milton), who kept his taps running all day "by way of lulling himself with the sound of a waterfall." It is not the result of any poetic intensity of vision or any striving for artistic effect. It is the result of enjoyment and observation, which we may take as the two primary rules of writing. They are, of course, dependent on each other. No man can observe truthfully without enjoying; no man can appreciate without observing.

## On Observation

But most of us are content with pictures at second-hand and when we tell even of our own experiences we dismiss them in a word. Anyone who has tried to keep a diary, or to describe vividly an incident in a letter, knows that temptation to use not only the phrases but the pictures that other people have created for him. For every thought has to go through a sort of double dilution. Vivid enough in the mind of the speaker, it has to be translated from thought to word, and then, in the mind of a third person, back once more to thought. It is as if we tried to convey in words to a companion our impressions of a symphony of Beethoven, and he were to express our words to a Hottentot by means of gestures. There is a twofold barrier to be surmounted, and the messages we send across are at best only half articulate. To attempt to convey an image or an emotion to another when it is not even clear in our own minds is to become insincere, to clothe ourselves in the utterance of other men.

For God has made each one of us as lone  
As He Himself sits

For observation means not only a power of noticing things, but of noticing significant things. Dickens has been praised often enough for being able to remember all the names of the shops in a street he had once passed through. A remarkable feat but I have sometimes wondered if he observed those other things as well—what the sky looked like, and how the sunlight struck the roofs of the houses. This seems to me false observation observation of the things that matter least. I remember long ago going for a walk with a young and too enthusiastic architect. It was one of those days in early spring, when the sky is a pale



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

brittle blue, like porcelain, and the leaves a green turmoil of wind among the branches. He didn't speak very much of things outside architecture, but his comment on his surroundings was characteristic "Rather unsatisfactory country, this," he said "Scarcely a single example of genuine half-timber work."

That was the utterance of a specialist, only alive to one-thousandth of the beauty of the world Yet most of us are little better The average man travels up to his office in the morning He is whirled through space on wheels journeying at sixty miles an hour on a planet that is itself a sort of celestial express. Crowded with him are hundreds of human destinies, each as mysterious and romantic as his own. The mere fact of putting his foot on the carriage step was an adventure, the mere fact of seeing the train under a stream of smoke performing the momentary miracle of perspective, how strange and thrilling an experience! Yet on his return, asked what had happened to him, he would probably reply, "Nothing Quite a good journey, rather dull, though" He has, in fact, lost a gift which had not been lacking in his childhood, he had lost the gift of Wonder The small boy who found the train as romantic as a dragon has grown into the man who has seen a train so often that he has come at last never to look at it at all The princess has turned back once more into the wolf The million miracles of every day have become taken for granted, and life is a humdrum business

But adventures need not be breathless to be interesting It makes little difference what one is, or what one does. The only thing which matters is how one looks at life The world is all within us where to choose Most of us are living lives more full of adventure than the buccaneers, for adven-

## *On Observation*

tures are matters of the mind, of the point of view. And I have known men who have travelled all over the world, who have watched savages dancing round horrible altars and assisted at unspeakable rites. And yet they never had an adventure—lacking that elemental wonder which turns the commonplace into the romantic.

I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. To the eye of the miser a guinea is far more beautiful than the sun, and a bag worn with the use of money has more beautiful proportions than a vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way. Some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers. You certainly mistake when you say that the visions of fancy are not to be found in this world. To me this world is all one continued vision.—BLAKE.

I have sometimes thought that the secret of happiness is to keep until you are an old man the spirit of adventure never, by losing Wonder, to take anything for granted, always to look at everything as if for the first time. After all, we have not yet attained to a perfect understanding of the smallest flower and why the grass should rather be green than red.<sup>1</sup>

So often we find ourselves observing without insight, without imagination. I remember a portrait of Chaucer in the Harleian Manuscript. His right hand is raised, pointing at something before him, his eyes are fixed, like the eyes of Uvar Ivanovitch, on the far horizon. Chaucer, of all poets, was the keenest observer. For observation means not

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

merely the power of seeing vividly, but the power of transmitting vision to others, not merely the seeing eye, but the pointing hand. What he saw, Chaucer interpreted with his imagination; for all vivid thinking is thinking in pictures—seeing with the “inward eye.” To him the daisy was one of the smallest of flowers, but it was also one of the loveliest; and the fat wife of Bath not merely a commonplace, garrulous old woman, but a human being, intensely alive, intensely interesting—a comic spectacle that held in it, too, something of suffering and pathos:

But Age, allas! that al wole envenyme  
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith

When once we have followed Chaucer's hand and seen through Chaucer's eyes, we realize how often we ourselves have met the Wife of Bath, cracking her loud jests and pushing with coarse good-humour through the crowds. It is only that we have taken her, and a thousand like her, for granted that we have once more failed to observe imaginatively. Though he had nothing of Chaucer's genius, Frith, that journalist of Art, immortalized in his picture of a railway station the ghosts that haunt every great terminus. With observation allied to imaginative insight, he has painted the *spirit* of the station—that queer monastery of the crowd, where all emotions jostle and all are transitory. Frith's picture is something more than a picture of an ordinary station and to a common sower in the fields Millet has given the tragic grandeur of a race.

It is not that we ever expect to become ourselves Friths or Chaucers, a world of Chaucers would be an impossible paradise—with no fat wives or pardoners to observe. It is only that the training of this latent sympathy, this imagina-

## On Observation

tive insight, will open up some of the million unfulfilled possibilities of existence.

Looked at in the right way, and this is Chaucer's teaching, nothing in the world is dull. Observed faithfully, the smallest things are full of the interest of the unexpected. Anywhere, even in a dungeon, there is food for inexhaustible imagination, insatiable curiosity

Through any window may be seen the same gracious depths of blue air as Buddha contemplated through the interstices of his tree, as Michael Angelo saw through the windows of the Sistine Chapel. The long gaze of a sick man may probe as far into the illimitable as they did. In the vast caverns of space, where Sirius lights the traveller, a genius and a weary invalid are equals—both frail as star-dust, both elder brothers of the sun.<sup>1</sup>

All the greatest writing has this behind it—a passionate enjoyment of triviality—an observation so truthful and intense that it can render any picture vivid to the reader's mind. That is the function of poetry and of the finest prose—and one feels as if one had never seen a robin or an apple-branch before, when, for the first time, one reads of "that little hunchback in the snow," or apple boughs as knarred as old toads' backs." To observe and to enjoy details are qualities within the reach of everyone, qualities which decay if they are not consciously and continually employed. If there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon it is time to end it, to rush into the secret house of death." If a man is sincere over his sensations, even a meal can become a thing of beauty or a work of art. Morton Shand can describe a poached egg as Pater describes the *Mona Lisa*. Hazlitt can describe a tavern dinner in prose as Hogarth could describe it in a picture, and appreciation

Mary Webb, *The Spring of Joy* p. 217 (Cape).

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

and a divine gusto have made Lamb's letter on the pig which Coleridge sent him a piece of literature. And sincerity of this kind always gives remarkable results. The most ordinary of men becomes a poet under the stress of great emotion, and the lament which Evelyn wrote on the death of his son in 1658 is one of the beautiful prose passages in literature. "Here ends the joy of my life, for which I go even mourning to the grave."

Few dislike writing essays, if they have once been taught to observe and to enjoy. But I fancy it is a mistake to force anyone to write on a given subject. Observation is a thing so largely dependent on mood.

O the fine earth and fine all for nothing!  
Mazed I walkt, seeing and smelling and hearing,  
The meadowlands all shining fearfully gold,—  
Cruel as fire the sight of them touched my mind,  
Breathing was all a honeytaste of clover  
And beanflowers I would have rather had it  
Carrion, or the stink of smouldering brimstone

The mind has to be in a receptive state: and on a grey day we may go for a walk and notice nothing. Indeed, a grey day we call a "dull day." And only Nature's advertisements—colour and birds and sunlight—can force the mind to detail. It is only the man who has acquired the *habit* of observing who can see under the clouds as clearly as in full sunlight. For honesty, sincerity (like most other virtues) are not gifts, nor to be learnt in a day, but are acquired by habit.

Before anyone is taught to write essays at all, he should be taught to see things vividly and honestly. He might even be induced to carry a notebook about like Tennyson, or an ink-pot in his walking-stick, like Hobbes, though

## *On Observation*

this would no doubt little by little turn him into a prig, like Eric, who quoted Goethe on his death-bed. And though the notebook may help to train the power of observation till it becomes a habit, the best notes are written in the memory. It is a matter only of keeping the mind alert. Even on a Sunday walk

the heart  
May give a useful lesson to the head,  
And Learning wiser grow without his books.

With a young mind, and young minds always think in pictures, the stimulation of the faculty of observing and recording in the imagination is more important than a hundred essays. Imagination is a tool that rusts—"faint the cold work"—and imagination is fed and fostered through the eye.

It is easier, I suppose, at the age of nine or ten than ever afterwards to shun the literary habit, to pay no heed to convention, to be wholly sincere. If a child is encouraged every hour of his life to make clear to himself his own opinions and their justification, at least it will help to free his mind from cant. It will be an attempt only partially successful, partially articulate but it will be a training in expression. It will also be a training in criticism and appreciation—something at any rate to protect him from the chorus of ready-made opinions that howl from the daily papers and the cinema. Grant me patience, just Heaven!—Of all the cants which are canted in this canting world—though the cant of hypocrites may be the worst—the cant of criticism is the most tormenting!"

I am, however, very far from suggesting that anyone

*Tristram Shandy* III. xii.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

should be taught to look on life as a drama of which he is himself the centre. That will only mean unhealthy stimulus to the imagination. He should be taught certainly that life is an adventure: but the adventure is not featuring *him*. It is fatal for a child's thoughts and speculations to be centred on himself. Something of the value of History and English is that they teach one to have heroes—to love the poetry of Blake, or to honour the heroism of Nelson. A writer should see from the centre all he describes—he should look at things from his own point of view—but he should never see himself as the central figure of the picture. This is not introspection, it is the reverse. It is not asking what other people think of me, but what I think of other people—and why. No one should be afraid of self-revelation, if he is taught that only the few can be impersonal and remain interesting, and that only a fool can talk about himself, his likes and dislikes, and remain uninteresting. This is merely the cultivation of ideas. Anyone can collect facts, ideas are different. They are the coin of poets and of all creative artists—the fairy gold of imagination. A fact is useless if it stands alone and unrelated.

Just tell me then what the word Education means.<sup>1</sup> To some Education consists in knowing the name of Alexander's horse, the dog Bérécillo, and the Seigneur des Accords, and not to know that of the man to whom we owe porcelain and the floating of logs. To others to be educated is to know how to burn up a will and to live as honorable men, beloved and respected.<sup>1</sup>

The world is largely populated by dreadful creatures with minds like lumber-rooms, filled with other people's goods. The only way to begin learning is by association, by linking

<sup>1</sup> Balzac, *Le Peau de Chagrin*, 1 75

## *On Observation*

fact to fact, so as to create a concerted whole. A date, a name, a definition—these are useless if they are simply in the air, arid abstractions without anchor. It is only when they are made to fit into a picture that they become significant. Otherwise one loses perspective. Otherwise Henry VIII and his wives come to dominate the politics of Europe. To learn that Shakespeare was born in 1564 is, by itself, as useless as contemplating the date of the battle of Hadesh, or the fact that Zoroaster lived entirely on cheese, or the number of red herrings required to encircle Saint Sophia. The interlinking of Geography and History and English is the only way to teach or to learn these subjects. In its proper surroundings no fact is valueless or without meaning, it is when the facts have to come before the surroundings that the hieratic obscurity of education begins. That is why it is impossible adequately to teach a dead language to anyone under the age of fifteen or sixteen, except by the time-honoured methods of Squeers or the Rev Mr Stelling. I have always thought that no man could be fully or wholly a scholar without some training in Greek and Latin. But it is folly to place it before a knowledge of the native language and literature. "If the threatened calamity should ever come," says Schopenhauer, and the ancient languages cease to be taught, a new literature will arise of such barbarous, shallow, and worthless stuff as was never seen before. Which is nonsense for the old theory that no man could write good English unless he were also a master of Latin prose has been exploded since the days of Johnson. But to teach a series of arbitrary symbols, as must be taught in Latin, is to teach things that bear no relation to facts observed.

O Table! Hieratically one apostrophizes furniture. In all art facts are useless unless they are imaginatively inter



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

puted Everyone begins by thinking in pictures, in the realm of ideas: and the first essential for him to be taught is the use of his imagination.

Nothing so sharpens a sense of loveliness. Nothing so vivifies the commonplace. Observation stimulates the habit of asking questions—of ceaseless curiosity. It teaches that no detail is negligible that the smallest point about a man's appearance may have a bearing on his whole life The untrained imagination riots among horrors and impossibilities. The trained imagination is the beginning of enjoyment and enjoyment is one of the ends of education

A man of polite imagination is let into a great many pleasures that the vulgar are not capable of receiving He can converse with a picture and find an agreeable companion in a statue He meets with a secret refreshment in a description, and often feels a greater satisfaction in the prospect of fields and meadows than another does in their possession It gives him indeed a kind of property in everything he sees, and makes the rude, uncultivated parts of Nature administer to his pleasure, so that he looks upon the whole world, as it were, in another light, and discovers in it a multitude of charms that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind —ADDISON

## II

### ON WRITING THE ESSAY

#### I THE ESSAY

It is therefore only after observing and enjoying that we are capable of trying to set down our feelings. Observation gives matter enjoyment gives style—or something of it. And without these two things, nothing was ever written worth the writing

We are asked to express the results of our observation and enjoyment in the form of an essay And yet the word Essay remains undefined. I give below some of the ways in which essays have been begun. Some are short, some long, some light, some serious, they seem to possess no characteristic in common.

Houses are built to Live in, not to look on.<sup>1</sup>

Every man, says Tully has two characters, one which he partakes with all mankind, and by which he is distinguished from brute animals, and another which discriminates him from the rest of his own species, and impresses on him a manner and temper peculiar to himself.<sup>2</sup>

Reader, wouldst thou know what true peace and quiet mean wouldst thou find a refuge from the noises and clamours of the multitude wouldst thou enjoy at once solitude and society wouldst thou possess the depth of thy own spirit in stillness, without being shut out from the consolatory faces of thy species wouldst thou be alone and yet accompanied solitary and yet not desolate singular yet not without someone to keep thee in countenance a unit in aggregate, a simple in composite?<sup>3</sup>

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Bacon.

<sup>1</sup> Dr Johnson.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Lamb

## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

What is to be thought of *her*?<sup>1</sup>

To write history respectable—that is, to abbreviate despatches, and make extracts from speeches, to intersperse in due proportion epithets of praise and abhorrence, to draw up antithetical characters of great men, setting forth how many contradictory virtues and vices they united, and abounding in *withs* and *withouts*—all this is very easy<sup>2</sup>

Thank Heaven! I have caught it 3

Perhaps you do not know where Ethandune is Nor do I, nor does anybody That is where the somewhat sombre fun begins<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps you do not know what an essay is Nor do I, nor does anybody. That is where the somewhat sombre fun begins For we are expected to know. We are asked in the most casual fashion to be prepared to write an essay on any conceivable subject Yet nobody quite knows what a word which includes in its implications the writings of essayists, from Francis Bacon to A G Gardiner, precisely means Terms in literature are not exact and local as they are in science Anything which is fictional and imaginative is called a novel, unless it is not written in prose, when it is called a poem Here I take an essay to mean, very vaguely, a series of revelations of personal thoughts and opinions on a certain theme. “dispersed meditations” Bacon called his Essays The very word reveals how loose and incomplete an art-form it is—an “essay” is only an *attempt*. “It is myselfe I pourtray,” says Montaigne, and self-portraiture is apt to be a somewhat random and allusive business In such a definition, the essay fantastic, expository, descriptive, enthusiastic, historical, or flippant can all be merged But the ordinary man is entitled only to give his personal opinion

<sup>1</sup> De Quincey

<sup>2</sup> Macaulay

<sup>3</sup> Alpha of the Plough.

<sup>4</sup> G K Chesterton

## On Writing the Essay

He has every right to an opinion, he has no right at all to pronounce a dictum. It is unfair to teach him to write in the pulpit, *ex cathedra* style of Macaulay. It used to be considered a solecism to begin an essay with the words "I think."<sup>1</sup> But an essay is what the writer thinks, and he should express it as an opinion and not as a law. It used also to be held a rule of essay writing that every essay should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is correct. What is incorrect is the theory that an essay must have an Introduction, a Body, and a Conclusion. In itself it is a complete work of art, but it never aims at a complete rendering of its subject.

The Essay, in the hands of the earlier writers, was something very much more massive and complete (in spite of Johnson's definition) than it is to-day. Bacon is concisely discursive, briefly encyclopaedic. In the manner of Aristotle's *Poetics*, he treats within a small compass every aspect of his subject. I can imagine that Bacon's rough notes for an essay would be something as alarming as the subsections, members, and partitions of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. He was bound by the old schools of Rhetoric and Logic, such genera as are tabulated at the beginning of any Elizabethan textbook of these subjects, and tabulation is the thief of wit. Bacon loves those themes that can be divided and subdivided. Sedition—beginnings, materials, causes, remedies. He builds his essays like pieces of meticulous architecture. And, even so, the Essays of Bacon show a very limited range of ideas. The arrangement is confused, the reasoning unsatisfactory, the philosophy little more than attractive rhetoric. When he deals with subjects that do not easily admit of tabulation—such themes as Love,

<sup>1</sup> It is; but only because of the tautology. *sc.* p. 40.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Marriage, or Friendship—he dismisses them as trifling interruptions to the more serious pursuits of life. He feels rather undignified when he unwittingly finds himself revealing his own weaknesses, his snobbery, his love of pomp “These things are but Toyes to come amongst such serious observations,” he says, in his *Essay on Masques and Triumphs* Hypocrite in more ways than one, he abjures them with a contemptuous wave of the hand “Enough of these Toyes”—let us get on to more enduring things to Cunning, or Dissimulation, or Wisdome for a Man’s Selfe. “I cannot understand his enigmatic, folded writing,” remarked his poor mother,

I hate that attempt at a bird’s-eye view of a subject, that effort to do the work of an encyclopaedia If an essay does that, it becomes a Treatise, like the *De Amicitia*, and most of the writings of Macaulay—balancing good and bad, advantages and disadvantages, and finally summing up in a dignified and impartial peroration

The Essay of to-day is essentially a thing about “Nothing”—a series or relevant irrelevancies. It selects one aspect of a theme, and allows its fancy to play round it—in that way being something like a poem. A modern essayist might write on a Visit to the Hairdresser. He might begin with a description of the visit and an account of the sensuous delights which he experiences He might pass to a discussion about the conversation of barbers. And then he might perfectly naturally devote the main body of his essay to pointing out that the ordinary pleasures of life are really the greatest, dilating on such examples as sawing wood or going for a walk Chesterton writes on the *Advantages of Having One Leg*, and, after remarking that the small ills of life are the hardest to bear, he dwells for a time on the

## On Writing the Essay

beauty of isolation, and concludes by showing how the absence of one leg really draws attention to the presence of the other. Bacon would have tabulated his essay —

### A. Advantages of But One Limb

1. Enableth one to rest at ease.
2. Enhanceth the Value of its Companion.

### B. Disadvantages

1. A One-legged Man hath small Stabilitie. (Solomon hath well said, *Fons turbatus et Vena corrupta, est Iustus cadens in causa sua coram Adversario* etc.)

He would have begun thus "It is a wise Saying, that of Harmodius, that *A Foolish Man hath no Leg to Stand on*. It is often seene that Men who do most use their Legs do least use their Heads." And he would have finished with a rounded summary. Certainly there is a Consent betweene the Body and the Minde, and where Nature erreth in the One she ventureth in the Other. *Ubi peccat in uno, periclitatur in altero*. Since the days of Bacon the main development of the Essay has inevitably been in the direction of a lighter and less encyclopaedic handling.

## 2. MATERIALS AND IDEAS

The preliminary to the writing of the Essay is the gathering of the material. Now, in a Treatise, material means facts, their arrangement, and their exposition. In the type of Essay with which I am dealing—the only form of essay a beginner should be asked to attempt—material means ideas. Ideas are essential and they are free for the choosing to anyone with a brain. If people complain of a lack of ideas, it means only that they are too lazy to drag them up from the ground at the bottom of their mind. Before thinking of the pen,

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

the writer must not only have something to express, but feel also a desire to express it.

"Yes—but what about exams?" comes the despairing question.

"There, where we have to be 'fructuous and that in litel space,' comes in the value of having thoughts——"

"Yes, but how can I have thoughts on things I've never thought about?"

"Well, think about them."

(Followed by a pause, presumably filled with profound thought)

Dull pensiveness

Bewrays itself in thy long-settled eye,

—and the penholder is chewed, and still the sheet unspotted. . . .

Yet nothing fails to yield ideas if it is really thought about. Thinking about a thing does not mean merely retaining its visual presence in the imagination. It means turning it over, looking at it upside down, inside out. Speculation It is not difficult to conduct an argument with oneself, to form a sort of Socratic dialogue with the Ego. Given a subject as simple as trees, we need know nothing more about them than their appearance. We ask ourselves the old tag of the schoolmen of the Middle Ages. "Quis? Quid? Ubi? Quibus auxiliis? Cur? Quomodo? Quando?" What are trees? What are they used for? Where did they come from? and so on, and (if we happen to have sufficient general knowledge) I dare say we shall achieve a quite passable treatise, partly botanical, partly geographical. We shall have talked of the way plants breathe, and the Glacial Period, and What Not: and have been just a trifle dull.

## On Writing the Essay

But if we asked ourselves what we really *think* and not merely what we *know* about trees, the answer will at least be interesting. At first it will probably be, 'I never have thought much about them. Well, think again. Think *round* them. What would the world look like without them? What trees do I like best? Do I remember any particular trees in books, pictures, poems, or any legends about woods? Why would I rather spend a night in a field than in a forest? Or, even, what reflects more vividly than a tree the moods and mutations of Nature? A host of ideas flock as numerous as the defeated armies of Satan—groves where the old gods were worshipped, Yggdrasil, genealogical trees. Ideas are like

A circle in the water  
Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself  
Till by broad spreading it dispereth to nought.

Robert Bridges weaves a cloud of ideas round a single ship following it to the calms of the Pacific and to the harbour where it enters, queen of the strange shipping there." We find that all great poets have this power over ideas, ideas which are self fructifying, which weave a tapestry out of the imagination, so that the song of a Highland girl can send Wordsworth travelling to Arabia and the Hebrides, and an ice-cart can transport Wilfred Gibson

O'er sapphire berg and emerald floe  
Beneath the still, cold, ruby glow  
Of everlasting Polar night.

To the average man a Grecian urn is, after all, only a Grecian urn very beautiful, very old, not particularly useful. But Keats ponders on the remote mystery of its past, the 'leaf fringed legend.' Time cannot touch these lovers, fixed in



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

their immortal ecstasy. Imagination has given him the dream of the little town beside the sea, whose men and women have thus been rapt from life, leaving the streets echo-less and deserted. Imagination "teases him out of thought." And there is a delightful poem by J. C. Squire, in which he speculates about the inhabitant of a lonely house.

Did he turn through his doorway  
And go to his study,  
And light many candles?  
And fold in the shutters,  
And heap up the fireplace  
To fight off the damp?  
And muse on his boyhood  
And wonder if India  
Ever was real?  
And shut out the loneliness  
With pig-sticking memoirs  
And collections of stamps?

He does little more than ask question after question, and each question leads on to the next. I suggested the time-worn tag, Who? What? Where? as a last resort to stimulate the mind. But it has this amount of value, nothing so rapidly fertilizes the brain as the mere asking of questions, even of silly questions. The asking of questions was H. G. Wells's method in some of his early books. He formed a postulate, and then speculated as to what would happen if that were true. If a man could get to the moon, what would he find? The idea of a voyage to the moon has been treated hundreds of times, from Lucian to Godwin. It was in the answers to the new questions that Wells was original. If a man could become invisible, what would he really feel? And would he be as well off as Gyges, or the character in the *Arabian Nights*?

## *On Writing the Essay*

It is no bad idea to develop that habit of asking questions by imitating Sherlock Holmes. One will not find it hard to deduce something about the prejudices, personality, and environment of a man, if a few obvious clues are given—a cigarette-case, or a pocket book. It might also be pursued with discretion, in a third-class railway carriage. And to Sherlock Holmes no newspaper was so full of mystery and strange excitements as the human face. Not less romantic are one's fellow travellers than the destinies that came to so abrupt a conclusion on the bridge of San Luis Rey and every bookseller behind his counter is a possible or potential Kipps. Everywhere is an unlimited field for imaginative speculation, for everyone has his own vivid and absorbing background.

It is the commonest of fallacies to suppose that one subject is any duller or more interesting than another. We are apt to think that the interesting subjects are those which we happen to know something about ourselves. But nothing is dull, when the imagination amends it. Imagination can find something new to say even about a donkey

Fools! For I also had my hour,  
One far, fierce hour and sweet—  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet!

Asked what they liked most in life, many people might answer 'Dinners, Going to the Theatre, Motor-cars. If they are like you and me and Rupert Brooke, they might reply

Royal flames  
Sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap to spring  
Holes in the ground and voices that do sing

---

G. K. Chesterton.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Voices in laughter too, and body's pain  
Soon turned to peace, and the deep-panting train;  
Firm sands, the little dulling edge of foam,  
That browns and dwindles as the wave goes home,  
And washen stones, gay for an hour, the cold  
Graveness of iron, moist, black, earthen mould,  
Sleep, and high places, footprints in the dew,  
And oaks, and brown horse-chestnuts glossy-new,  
And new-peeled sticks, and shining pools on grass,—  
All these have been my loves

It is the big things which are the hard things to write of. Nothing is easier than to produce an essay on cheese, umbrellas, beards, or nicknames. There is less chance of uttering truisms, or of being bald or prosy. It is easy to say something new about boots, it is very hard to find something new to say about the sea or the holidays. That is why the Walrus made such an excellent choice of subjects to beguile the last, melancholy constitutional of the oysters.

“The time is come,” the Walrus said,  
“To talk of many things,  
Of shoes and ships and sealing wax,  
And cabbages and kings,  
And why the sea is boiling hot,  
And whether pigs have wings.”

It is not the ability to answer questions so much as the ability to ask them which is difficult to acquire. It is, of course, useless to ask questions which can only be answered by the obvious. If we are really sincere, we shall find that our own thoughts about most subjects are unlike anyone else's. To be wholly truthful to oneself is to be individual, no man being made in another's mould. To question everything, to rest content with nothing we have not thought

## On Writing the Essay

out for ourselves is to find Originality. No one until H. G. Wells wrote the *Country of the Blind* had ever questioned the supremacy of the one-eyed man over the blind man. Few proverbs, even in their metaphorical sense, are more than half true. And the dullest object in the world will yield something to sincerity and perseverance. Swift was praised by Lady Berkeley for his "excellent Meditation upon a Broomstick." Brilliant though the parody is, there are still left a hundred things to say on the same subject. The broomstick, after all, was the chariot of the witch.

Cultivate enjoyment and appreciation of everything. Be like Sir Thomas Browne, "of a constitution so general that it consorts and sympathizes with all things." The true musician can appreciate all types of music. It is only the intellectual snob who worships Bach, and has no time for barrel-organs.

### 3 SELECTION AND ARRANGEMENT

A flow of ideas uncontrolled leads to chaos, "no light, but rather darkness visible." The writer is, above all, a craftsman, a technician. A comparison of the Letters of Charles Lamb with the *Essays of Elia* is no bad lesson in the art of essay writing. Over and again the letter is the rough draft of the essay: he lets his ideas accumulate, flings them off pell mell in the form of a letter to a friend, and (often years later) produces the same ideas, dressed up in his own ecstatic and inimitable style.

No work of art was ever accomplished without the exercise of the divine gift of self-restraint.

Hold your little thoughts in sight,  
Though gay they run and leap

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

It is only the practised essayist who is capable of making his brain his rough scheme. It is imperative that, having collected your ideas, you should check your exuberance and reduce them to order. For an essay is like a house on fire. In the upper room of the burning tower, at the first alarm, you lay hands on everything indiscriminately. In a sort of intellectual panic you fling them all out of the window on to the ground. Having descended safely yourself, you then choose out from the collection all the articles of value you can conveniently carry away. You *select*.

One of the chief differences between a great poet and a minor poet is this power of selection. In that famous passage in *King Lear*, where Edgar describes to the blind Duke the imaginary cliff before them, every detail increases the overwhelming impression of height—the crows as small as beetles, the climber gathering samphire, the fishermen on the beach, the

murmuring surge  
That on the unnumbered idle pebbles chafes,

yet lies so far distant that the waves fall soundless. Thomas Hardy gives a picture of winter in half a dozen lines, and his selection of detail is nearly as vivid as that of the lyric in *Love's Labour's Lost*

When beeches drip in browns and duns,  
And thresh and ply,  
And hill-hid tides throb, throe on throe,  
And meadow rivulets overflow,  
*And drops on gate-bars hang in a row,*  
And rooks in families homeward go,  
And so do I

## *On Writing the Essay*

And in four lines Edward Thomas gives the whole atmosphere of a small wayside station on a summer afternoon

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop—only a name.

The silence is made the deeper by small sounds. The bare platform, the signpost outside the window, the song of the blackbird. It is a photograph of a fleeting instant of time, of one of those moods that fade before they are realized, winged Psyches in the moment of birth sick with the pangs of dissolution.

Selection is the first duty of the essayist, as it is of the poet. I have pointed out that the encyclopaedic treatment of a theme, however concise, is a treatise rather than an essay. Lack of selection results in chaos or in simple dulness, like *Ulysses*. It is largely a mechanical process. Quite unconsciously the human eye selects in looking at a picture. It sees really only certain details in the view. In the writing of a diary or a letter describing the week's events, selection is automatic. It is probable that thus automatically, and from no consciously artistic motives, you will leave the most important and interesting event (the climax) to the end—even if it be only a postscript asking for money. The writer casts a searchlight on one aspect of his subject, rather than lets it play idly over the whole surface. And before he begins to think of arranging ideas, he will have made up his mind from what angle he will approach his theme. If he were asked to write an essay on the sea, he might write a description, a story about a shipwreck, a geographical treatise on its relation to the land, or a botanical thesis on deep-sea plants, but he could not possibly write them all.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Having chosen a particular aspect of his theme, the writer will gather every idea he can which bears on that aspect, however remotely; and no others. That is important. For an essay is even more like a train journey than like a house on fire. If one starts off from Laburnum Villa on a tour, one's objective is ultimately Laburnum Villa, however wide the wandering. One may get out at any station and explore the countryside, provided one really manages to arrive home and is not stranded in Little Tooting. This is the meaning of Construction. Having gathered ideas, having selected them, then comes the hardest process of all, getting them into logical order, so as to work gradually and inevitably to the climax. No essay should be begun till the ending is clearly in sight. The first paragraph should not be written till the entire shape of the essay is concrete in the author's mind. Details, modifications, new ideas will occur to him as he writes, but the architecture of the whole will remain substantially unaltered. A badly constructed essay lacks balance, proportion: it is like a house which is all porch and no dining-room. The scheme of the essay should rise slowly to a climax, logical and closely knit. If we were writing on circuses, we might choose to deal with the ancient gladiators, or be Baconian and begin with a description of the elephant "writhing his lean proboscis" for the amusement of Eve, or come down to modern times and discuss the decline of the circus, or be Dickensian and talk about the tragedy behind the clown's mask—or be ourselves, and describe our own opinions and experiences. Hosts of ideas would flock to our minds, till we might find some difficulty in controlling them. If we were writing Alpha of the Plough's *Essay on Finger Posts*, it is little help so sternly to control our thoughts as merely to jot down :

## On Writing the Essay

1. Finger Posts. What they are.
2. Finger Posts. (a) Use of.  
(b) Misuse of.

And then stick. Each number, each division of the rough scheme stands for a paragraph. The paragraphs are the slices of the pudding, each cut from the same thing, each similar yet each individual. They serve to give the reader a rest, like the scenes of a play, and to direct his attention to another aspect of the main theme. A paragraph is a series of sentences bearing on the subject of the essay, but containing each a separate contribution to it. The *Essay on Finger Posts* might have had a rough scheme something like this

1. Brief introductory paragraph describing a particular finger post directing the traveller to Dunstable.
2. Its loneliness, emphasized by an account of the children picknicking around it on their holidays. "No one ever seems to want to go to Dunstable."
3. Introduction of the main theme of the essay, and of the author's personality. The poetry of names. A visit to such a place might spoil the illusion. Ashby-de-la-Zouch.
4. Illustration of the main theme. Bideford.
5. Elaboration of paragraph 4 by anecdote.
6. Further illustration of main theme by employment of Contrast. Messing and Mucking.
7. Parenthesis on men who become myths. W. G. Grace.
8. Further elaboration by illustration of the main theme. Stevenson and Wyoming.
9. Additional illustration of main theme. Ohio.
10. Conclusion referring back to the opening:

"If I ever see a finger post pointing to Wyoming I shall ignore it as I ignore the hand that, from the corner of the orchard, points me to Dunstable."



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

If you read this essay you will notice that the finger post serves as an excuse for a whole crowd of romantic ideas, only remotely connected with it. The essay, in fact, is really an essay on the associations of names. He slips from one thought to another without jar, without letting the reader see how violently he has changed his course. In the rough scheme you may put as many connective phrases—"Now let us turn to . . .," "But, on the other hand . . .," "Moreover . . ."—as you wish, but each paragraph, and each sentence in each paragraph, must appear to lead inevitably to the next. There is no crime like dulness, and nothing leads so soon to dulness as too great symmetry. One feels that a good essay is in some way a *whole*. A bad essay is either so badly balanced that it becomes confused, or so well balanced that it becomes monotonous: advantages, disadvantages, summary. It is like a suburban mantelpiece, with its oleographs and china vases arranged in carefully descending gradations. If Whistler had painted another grandmother the other way round to balance the original figure, his portrait would have been a mere decoration, like the endlessly repeated roses of a wall-paper. If he had omitted to hang that picture on the wall exactly where he did hang it, the portrait would have lacked balance. Ideas must be arranged to balance thus, before the essay is written:

For of the soul the body form doth take,  
For soul is form and doth the body make

It should climb naturally to its climax, focusing on the most interesting or original part of its theme. If you were to take a photograph of York Minster from the air, you would find the tower almost lost in a tangle of roofs and gables. If you were to paint a picture of it, you would have to

## On Writing the Essay

eliminate, select, so as to bring the tower into relief. Alpha of the Plough starts and finishes with the finger post but in the meantime he has used it as an excuse to bring into full relief his true theme. And he leaves us not, it is true, with an exhaustive knowledge of finger posts, but certainly with a romantic interest in them. An essay on animals might begin with a caged tiger at the Zoo, might go on to discuss the attitudes of the spectator towards the tiger, the question of the New Humanitarianism, animal worship in modern poetry, sentimentalism, even the sentimental attitude of the average person towards miners or warfare—but at the end it must either return to animals or to the caged tiger, not abruptly but inevitably

### 4. BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The ending to Alpha of the Plough's *Essay on Finger Posts* is an admirable example of the hardest of all arts, winding up. Perhaps the beginning and the ending of the essay are the two most important things in it. Only the very greatest poets are masters of the opening. Keats failed often, Byron sometimes Milton, Shakespeare never. The first lines of Dryden are magnificent. He plunges, like Bacon, straight to his subject, never (as Goldsmith used to say of Burke) winding into it like a serpent.<sup>1</sup> Writing of *Antony and Cleopatra*, he begins "The death of Antony and Cleopatra is a subject which has been treated by the greatest wits of our nation."<sup>2</sup> I have been told that it is wrong to open with an introduction or that it is wrong to begin too abruptly, that one should not leap at once to the point, nor

Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, I. 601 (Simpkin ed.).

<sup>1</sup> *Preface to All for Love*, 1678.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

approach it from a tangent, nor hover too circumspectly on its fringes. But what is right in the hands of one is wrong in the hands of another. Bacon begins at once Charles Lamb plays for a time about the edges of his theme. And then again there is that unique, delightful opening to *Richard Yea and Nay*. "I like this good man's account of leopards" The opening sentence sets the stage and the atmosphere of the whole is implicit in the first paragraph Thus begins one of the most lovely of fifteenth-century books.<sup>1</sup>

In the year of the incarnation of Our Lord, 1371, as I was in a garden, all heavy and full of thought, in the shadow, about the end of the month of April, but a little I rejoiced me of the melody and song of the wild birds, they sang there in their languages, as the Thrustill, the Thrush and Tom-tit and other birds, the which were full of mirth and joy; and their sweet song made my heart to lighten, and made me to think of the time that is passed, of my youth, how love in great distress had held me, and how I was in her service many times full of sorrow and gladness as lovers be

After that, the quaint simplicity and sweetness of the old Knight's counsel for his daughters follow as inevitably as Chaucer's Prologue follows its opening line

Whatever the method, it is only the long, elaborate essay that can support an Introduction. If you are dealing with the Elizabethan novel in fifty pages, you may reasonably sketch in your first paragraph the Gestes and Romaunts of the Middle Ages But then you would be writing a thesis Be definite, and be certain of what you are going to speak Then say it A writer who begins, "I think," is wasting words, for an essay can be nothing else than what the author

<sup>1</sup> *Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*, 1371 Caxton's Translation of 1483

## *On Writing the Essay*

thinks. A writer who begins, "I scarcely know how to approach this subject," is like an embarrassed after-dinner speaker, he has given himself away, and had much better retire at once. I fancy it is a mistake to fly too soon to the subject there is always the danger of saying too much in too small a space. The art of essay writing is elaboration as much as condensation. But it is a far more serious mistake to arrive at the title too late. "Fly an eagle flight, bold and forth on." No one who has really thought out his subject should find any difficulty in his first paragraph. Which, of course, was what was wrong with Inigo Jollifant.

"It is eleven o'clock," he wrote. Having stared at this for a minute or two, he crossed it out and put in its place "I have just looked through the window which is gemmed with moisture." This did not please him, so out it came, and he began a new sheet, at which he frowned for nearly ten minutes. Then he wrote "Outside, this morning, the spoil of many clanking years —" crossed out "clanking", crossed everything out, then drew six faces and absent mindedly decorated them with curly moustaches then sighed filled and lit his pipe again, and leaned back in his chair.

This is no uncommon experience, but the first sentence is a more critical matter. In the last desperate resort, one can always begin with a quotation though an essay which opens with a trite quotation is an essay that remains unread. The only rule for the beginning is to interest. All the writer wants to do in the first paragraph is by any means, fair or foul, to induce the reader to go on to the second. But to be interesting is not the same as to be arresting. Here are three openings

I awoke from a dream of a gruesome fight with a giant

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J. B. Priestley *The Good Companions* p. 416.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

geranium I surveyed with drowsy satisfaction and complacency the eccentric jogs and jerks of my aunt's head <sup>1</sup>

The lieutenant stood in front of the steel sphere and gnawed a piece of pine-splinter "What do you think of it, Steevens?" he asked

"It's an idea," said Steevens, in the tone of one who keeps an open mind

"I believe it will smash—flat," said the lieutenant <sup>2</sup>

You have requested me, my dear friend, to bestow some of that leisure, with which Providence has blessed the decline of my life, in registering the hazards and difficulties which attended its commencement <sup>3</sup>

The best of these is the second, which at once arrests the attention and rouses the interest The first quotation is too sudden, and has no connection with the remainder of the story. The last needs a hammock and a lazy afternoon

The ending is even more important; and it is even more difficult in talking of it to avoid qualification. The ideal at which to aim is to make the reader satisfied, yet to make him regret that you have not continued; to satisfy and to pique simultaneously. The ending is a conclusion, not a winding up of indefinite strands. Only in writing a treatise is a summary permissible. The ending clinches, it should never gather laborious threads It is unnecessary to end with a flourish. Every bad overture ends with a sort of musical orgasm; every bad essay ends with a purple patch Come down to earth, not like a rock, with such sentence as:

And thus concludes my observations on Superstitions

Nor like a cushion with·

So we see that, while Superstition is common among primitive

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<sup>1</sup> W de la Mare

<sup>2</sup> H G Wells

<sup>3</sup> Scott

## *On Writing the Essay*

rites and rare among civilized, yet to the present day there still persist many traces of the old beliefs and fears.

Come down like a swallow

I should like to have seen Caesar, and I should like to have heard Cicero, but on the balance I think we who inherit this later day, and who can jest at the shadows that were so real to them, have the better end of time. It is pleasant to be about when the light is abroad. We do not know much more of the Power that "turns the handle of this idle Show" than our forefathers did, but at least we have escaped the grotesque shadows that enveloped them. We do not look for divine guidance in the entrails of animals or the flight of crows, and the House of Commons does not adjourn at a clap of thunder.

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Alpha of the Plough.

### III

## ON REVISING THE ESSAY

"What, have we another corrector of words!" quoth Sancho, "if we are to go on at this rate, we shall make slow work of it!"

#### I. WORDS

Looking through the essay is a sort of literary confessional. That you should have committed a hundred faults is inevitable in a first copy. But if your work is worth anything at all, you will be able to reply with a clear conscience to the first questions Have I been vivid? Have I been simple? Have I been sincere? If you have observed these, there will have been no need to hesitate or to qualify. You will have said what you meant, and refrained from imitating the style of a very great scholar and a very bad writer, who was for ever thinking in a muddled way. If he wanted to remark that Barclay was a minor poet with real talent, he might have said:

Nevertheless, if I may (and I think, on the whole, I may) say so, Alexander Barclay—while by no means on a level with the most glorious figures in our great national literature—is at least assured of a permanent (if small) niche in the Temple of Fame

Never be afraid of saying what you really mean and feel. If you were writing an essay on Umbrellas, you would be more interesting if you gave your own experiences than if you borrowed second-hand thoughts from other people. My own experience of umbrellas teaches me that they are the most delightful of companions for a walk, and afford inexhaustible amusement, whether they be used as temporary

## On Revising the Essay

parachutes, or balanced on the point and twirled round in puddles, or merely swung idly in the hand. They give the same sense of intimacy and comfort as a tent in a storm, indeed, I have always looked on an umbrella as a kind of portable room. But use your own thoughts, not mere facts which belong to other people as much as to yourself. Facts are always shared points of view are never quite the same. But (as My Uncle Toby would say) We will speak of this another time."

Stevenson used to call the business of Polishing the best part of writing. It is a matter primarily of words. For Language is a matter of words, and Literature only a kind of inspired juggling with them so it is strange that they should be so often despised. Before anyone begins to think how he can express a thought, it is as well once more to remember that the ideal in all writing is Clarity. Some words have a distant and romantic background. The mere word Book stretches into a remote past, the "liber" or inner bark of a tree, or the parchment which is so called only because a forgotten King of Pergamum discovered a new process of treating leather so that both sides could be written on. But there are other words which have lost their romance. In human speech for so many centuries men have wished to communicate certain emotions to each other, that there has evolved a language which is no language, valueless currency, a language of meaningless symbols. In the English speech there are over a thousand Words That Will Just Do. The phenomenon is neither rare nor extraordinary. Every day, as new words come into use, old words drop out or become debased. A word like "horrid" meant in Dryden's day precisely what *horridus* had meant in Virgil's —shaggy, as it means in such phrases as shagged with



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

horrid shades," or "horrid with briar and intricate with thorn." But it became gradually a word connoting unpleasantness of any kind—the unpleasantness which the eighteenth century associated with mountains—and a "horrid" man could be as beardless as a film star. Thus the word has lost its vividness. Wharton calls the Milton of the early poems "an old English poet in the tradition of Spenser," because he used strange and inkhorn terms:

I know each lane, and every alley green,  
Dingle, or bushy dell, of this wild wood,  
And every bosky bourn from side to side.

To critics of the eighteenth century these lines were "uncouth and strange." They suggest that the word "dingle" signifies "boughs hanging dingle-dangle over the edge of the dell." When Milton spoke of "osiers dank," no one in the next century realized the meaning of the adjective. So fluid is language. And so utterly do we lose sight of the historical associations of the common words that we call English spelling arbitrary and absurd. Real pedantry would spell disaster as "dysasteer." . . .

To us the word "vernal" is so colourless as to be nearly without meaning. It has dropped out of current speech: become debased. The "vernal morn" reminds us of the more lamentable passages in the poems of Mrs Hemans. It reminded Milton and the seventeenth century of Ovid, to them it was a familiar Latin word meaning Spring. It had for them as vivid a significance as the old Persian word scarlet has for us. It is only in the hands of Pope and Thomson that it lost its meaning, and therefore became Poetic Diction. Once these words were rich enough, but time, and constant, thoughtless use had dulled them till they are only what

## On Revising the Essay

Sir Thomas Browne calls the frigidities of Wit, and become not the Elegance of manly invention.

BOSWELL. Is there not imagination in them, Sir?

JOHNSON. Why, Sir, there is in them what ~~was~~ imagination, but it is no more imagination in *him*, than sound is sound in the echo. And his diction too is not his own. We have long ago seen *white-robed innocence* and *flower-bespangled meads*

Words become debased because familiarity breeds contempt the constantly used becomes at last unrecognizable. Coleridge tells how he once met a Jew crying out for Old Clothes "in the most nasal and extraordinary tone." Coleridge asked him why he could not say "Old Clothes" plainly, whereupon the Jew replied, Sir, I can say Old Clothes as well as you can, but if you had to say so ten times a minute, for an hour together, you would say *Ogh Cbo* as I do now." Such has been the disastrous fate of "verdant," "blooming, and "chap

Poetic Diction is the use of these debased words—these words that will just do—these adjectives that have always clung like barnacles to their own pet and particular nouns. In prose the use of these words is one of the symptoms of Journalese, lazy thinking. The true adjective originally has one meaning, often stretched to embrace two or three more. Thus the word "angry" means indignant, and is applied to a man who has lost his temper. But it may equally well be used to describe a sunset or a sea, meaning not indignant, but threatening. It could scarcely describe a Bath bun or a tea-cosy. But the Words That Will Just Do—lovely, dreadful, appalling, marvellous, and a hundred others—placed in front of any noun, retain as much meaning or as little as they had before, unless used in their strictly correct sense. Thus the word "nice" means fastidious or discriminat

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

ing: used in that sense it is doing its work. Otherwise it is out of place. it adds nothing.

TENNYSON A lady the other day here—a very nice woman (I don't altogether like the word, but I want it) was praising a friend of yours "Nice" is objectionable, but it is useful—a nice person is one that you're satisfied with

ALLINGHAM It used to mean fastidious—discriminative, but there's not much harm in its being turned about and applied to the object

TENNYSON No, it's something or somebody that satisfies your niceness<sup>1</sup>

There is a certain amount in common between a lowering sky and an infuriated man: applied to either the word angry is descriptive. But there is little in common between a cat and a cigar (except what misdirected ingenuity can discover), and each of these may equally well be described as lovely, dreadful, appalling, or marvellous.

"I am sure," cried Catherine, "I did not mean anything wrong, but it is a nice book, and why should I not call it so?"

"Very true," said Henry, "and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a very nice walk, and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! It is a very nice word indeed! It does for everything!"<sup>2</sup>

And that was in the dawn of the nineteenth century. Even Mr. Weller had more sense than to put up with colourless words:

Sam dipped his pen into the ink, to be ready for any corrections, and began with a very theatrical air

"Lovely——"

"Stop," said Mr. Weller, ringing the bell. "A double glass o' the invariable, my dear."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Journals of W. Allingham*

<sup>2</sup> *Northanger Abbey*

<sup>3</sup> *Pickwick Papers*

## On Revising the Essay

And Tennyson showed an exact sense of style in the use of an old English emphasizing adverb, to which the religious complexes of a later age gave a totally fictitious derivation. "That's an awfully jolly stanza!" said someone, when the Bard was reading aloud one of his poems.

Don't say "awfully"  
What shall I say then?  
Say, "bloody!"

Exactness in the correspondence of thought and phrase is the first essential of style. You remember the chapter in *Sentimental Tommy*, describing how Tommy sat for an hour with an essay half finished in front of him because he could not think of the exact word? Tommy was a conscientious artist, though possibly something of an intellectual prig. There is a somewhat similar passage in *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance*, describing the sentiments of the Tory correspondent of the *Gazette*

He never could tolerate in his own children a mere hackneyed, borrowed expression, but demanded exact portraiture and nothing vexed him more than to hear one of them spoil and make worthless what he or she had seen by reporting it in some stale phrase which had been used by everybody. This refusal to take the trouble to watch the presentment to the mind of anything which had been placed before it, and to reproduce it in its own lines and colours was, as he said, nothing but falsehood, and he maintained that the principal reason why people are so uninteresting is not that they have nothing to say. It is rather that they will not face the labour of saying in their own tongue what they have to say, but cover it up and conceal it in the commonplace, so that we get, not what they themselves behold and what they think, but a hieroglyphic or symbol invented as the representative

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

of a certain class of objects or emotions as *x* or *y* to set forth the relation of Hamlet to Ophelia —Chapter 1

This is sheer pedantry, a truth over-emphasized; but still a truth. Perhaps there can be no such thing as a cliché for the very young. But the habit of using the colourless word or the colourless phrase leads inevitably to dulness, to thinking through other people's minds.<sup>1</sup> In its right place the smallest and most ordinary word will shine out suddenly, like a star, as the word "sweet" shines out in one line of Shakespeare. "Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang"

### 2. THE MOT JUSTE

The mot juste is not quite the same thing in prose as in poetry. The word that flames from its setting like a jewel is out of place in prose. The finest prose never makes one pause in the middle of an argument or a scene to admire the style of a sentence. The finest poetry is continually startling in this way—dazzling the reader with the beauty of individual lines. In prose the mot juste is the word that so exactly expresses the writer's meaning that it needs no comment.

The chief beauty of writing is the adjective. Needless to say, the adjective is the word more often abused than any other. The exact, inevitable adjective is a rare thing; and literature is full of adjectives either misapplied or wholly

<sup>1</sup> "When I first looked upon the Falls of Clyde, I was unable to find a word to express my feelings. At last a man, a stranger to me, who arrived about the same time, said, 'How majestic!' (It was the precise term, and I turned round and was saying, 'Thank you, sir! That is the exact word for it,' when he added, *eodem flatu*) 'Yes! How very pretty!'" —Coleridge, *Table Talk*

## On Revising the Essay

unnecessary The adjective, particularly in poetry, gives to a line colour, beauty, vividness the verb gives strength.

With antique pillars massy-proof  
And storied windows richly dight,  
Casting a dim, religious light.

Here every adjective is exact and final. It is like a picture in oils as *L Allegro* is like a water-colour But the human element enters so largely into words. No adjective has quite the same shade of environment, or can call up to everyone quite the same associations. I remember once having my attention drawn by someone to the magical use of the word 'bosomed' in *Il Penseroso*

Bosomed high in tufted trees.

To me the word "bosomed" does not seem magical at all it creates a confused mental picture of St. Paul's Cathedral and my earliest nurse. Moreover trees are not tufted. The whole line smacks of the eighteenth century (which transmuted so much of Milton to dross), one half expects it to be completed by some ponderous and meaningless phrase

And nearby bosomed high in tufted trees  
The comfortable urn.

Comfortable! Anything less comfortable than an urn it would be difficult to imagine. The adjective misapplied is no less disastrous in poetry than in prose. But in prose the exact word is never the noticeable word.

Swift is the most perfect prose stylist in the English language and it is perhaps because of all writers he is the most blazingly sincere. He persuaded by sheer, naked simplicity the sort of simplicity that makes it idle to deny the strict truth of

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

such histories as *Moll Flanders*, or *Robinson Crusoe*, or *Gulliver*. There is about him nothing of the rhetorician. His sanity, his simplicity, his immense restraint, and, above all, his knowledge of human nature enabled him always to strike the right note. His writings are statements, judgments, or reasoned convictions, inspired by a terrible clarity, they are never pleadings or empty words. He was the greatest master of style in our literature and his own style was a formidable weapon. It was the weapon which overturned Marlborough at the height of his power; it was the weapon of which Walpole was afraid. Because it seldom rises to higher or falls to lower levels, it is not easy to give an example of Swift's style. The marvel of it is the consistent strength, purity, and simplicity.

He said they commonly acted like mortals till about thirty years old, after which by degrees they grew melancholy and dejected, increasing in both till they came to three score. When they came to four-score years, which is reckoned the extremity of living in this country, they had not only all the follies and infirmities of other old men, but many more which arose from the dreadful prospect of never dying. They were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, but incapable of friendship and dead to all natural affection, which never descended below their grand-children. Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions. But those objects against which their envy seems principally directed are the vices of the younger sort and the deaths of the old. By reflecting on the former, they find themselves cut off from all possibility of pleasure, and whenever they see a funeral, they lament and repine that others are gone to a harbour of rest, to which they themselves never can hope to arrive.<sup>1</sup>

The singular power of such a passage as this is dependent

<sup>1</sup> *Gulliver's Travels*, III. x

## *On Revising the Essay*

on no intricate harmony or rich tapestry of words. It is at once perfectly simple and perfectly clear. No word is used but the exact word, the word that performs its duty without either startling the reader into an *O Altitudol* or allowing him to drift along, catching only the vague outlines of the author's meaning. Its beauty is the beauty of strength, clarity, and simplicity.

By the use of the *mot juste* I do not mean the use of the inevitable word in the sense of the expected word. Nor do I mean the completely unexpected word. Somewhere Walter de la Mare speaks of a curtain "pouring down its motionless cataract of crimson." This is not prose, but poetry. The word cataract dazzles, arrests, stops for a moment the ordered march of narrative. "Wet sands, marbled with moon and cloud"—there all the effect is gained by the verb. In prose the use of the same word "marbled" is a trifle too self-conscious.

I would survey a stretch of perhaps thirty feet of wave-washed deck vanishing ever and again beneath swirling, foam-marbled water.<sup>1</sup>

The right word is the word that expresses the full meaning without obviously drawing attention to itself: the word which, in Keats's phrase, "appears almost a remembrance"—like Shakespeare's *multitudinous*, which includes in a single adjective the crowded restlessness of the sea. So many words will do." A man may walk, strut, stagger, go, reel, stumble, amble down a street, and each verb will utterly have altered the sense of the context. We say the sun shines but we could say also that sparks, diamonds, pearls, bonfires, and headlights shine—making them all colourless, lumping

H. G. Wells, *Mr. Bletsworthy on Rampole Island*.



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

them all together, as though a hundred different lights left the same visual impression. But if the right adjective or verb is used, there will be no need for the elaboration of a simile, or the qualification of a metaphor, no need for phrases like "sort of," "almost," "rather." It is a somewhat humiliating exercise to choose any sentence of fine prose or any line of great poetry and to try to substitute your own words, or to phrase it differently. Even to take an ordinary sentence from Swift or Stevenson is to learn something of the art of exactitude.

Before them the surf broke slowly All around, with an air of *imperfect, wooden things*, inspired with a *wicked activity*, the crabs *trundled and scuttled* into holes <sup>1</sup>

Such an exercise is proof again of the value of synonyms. The books that should stand at the bedside of every author are the Plays of Shakespeare, the Bible, and the *New Oxford Dictionary*. The atmosphere of a whole sentence can be altered by the substitution of words which have the same general meaning, but a wider or more poetic or more colloquial association.

At the casement sate the Queen, hearkening for the arrival of the steeds.

The Queen sat by the window, listening for the sound of the horses' hoofs

The Queen squatted in the window seat, one ear cocked for the nags' home-coming

### 3 SINCERITY AND SIMPLICITY

If you will read through the essay, asking yourself at every sentence, Does it say what it means? Does it say so

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, *The Ebb Tide*, chapter viii

## *On Revising the Essay*

clearly, simply, vividly? you will find that much of the duty of revision is the duty of excision. Remember that story of Swift's

A person reading to me a dull poem of his own making, I prevailed on him to scratch out six lines together, in turning over the leaf the ink being wet, it marked as many words on the other side whereof the poet complaining, I bid him be easy, for it would be better if those were out too.

But there are other traps of which to beware, easier to recognize, if also easier to fall into.

It is sometimes difficult to remember that, whatever else an essay may be, it is neither a sermon nor a conversation nor a speech. In arguing a point, or in attempting to make a line of thought clear, there is a strong temptation to appeal to the reader as one would appeal in a lecture

My dear boy reader don't suppose that I want you to imitate Owen in this matter I despise a boy who tells as much as you do.<sup>1</sup>

Such a remark as this not only brings argument or narration to a standstill, but invariably serves to infuriate the reader, whatever endearing epithet may be bestowed on him. The illusion is lost the story is only a fireside tale after all. Bring in your own personality as much as you can or care, but leave the personality of your audience alone. Apostrophe is a rhetorical device, and only to be justified in oratory, or when speech has risen so high as to be near the gates of poetry False Rhetoric is the Nemesis of insincerity It is as a tinkling cymbal—words with neither thought nor true feeling behind them. The purple patch must come inevitably or not come at all. Any famous centenary gives

<sup>1</sup> *FATHER Eric or Little by Little*, chapter III.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

birth to false rhetoric in certain newspapers. The writer strives to be worthy of a great occasion by outdoing Rodomonte with big words and strained metaphors:

Stringing pretty words that make no sense,  
Or kissing full sense into empty words.

A rhetorical device of this nature is only to be justified in such passages as the paragraph on Death in Sir Walter Raleigh's *Historie of the Worlde*, or by such styles as those of De Quincey, or Carlyle:

Coronets for thee! Oh, no! Honours, if they come when all is over, are for those that share thy blood. Daughter of Domremy, when the gratitude of thy king shall awaken, thou wilt be sleeping the sleep of the dead. Call her, King of France, but she will not hear thee. Cite her by the apparitors to come and receive a robe of honour, but she will be found *en contumace*. When the thunders of universal France, as even yet may happen, shall proclaim the grandeur of the poor shepherd girl that gave up all for her country, thy ear, young shepherd girl, will have been dead for five centuries. To suffer and to do, that was thy portion in this life, that was thy destiny, and not for a moment was it hidden from thyself. Life, thou saiest, is short, and the sleep which is the grave is long, let me use that life, so transitory, for the glory of those heavenly dreams destined to comfort the sleep which is so long.<sup>1</sup>

Repetition, too, is only justified in oratory, or in moments of high poetic intensity: and the essay is not made for moments of high poetic intensity. De Quincey's dreams should fall into another category. "Ercle's vein—a part to tear a cat in, to make all split"—is the prerogative of the pulpit or the rostrum.

This straining for effect is the result of another fault, the lack of aptness and truth to detail. No one would think of

<sup>1</sup> De Quincey, *Joan of Arc*.

## On Revising the Essay

writing a serious epitaph in the form of a limerick. It is unsafe to deal flippantly with solemn subjects. I remember once reading a lamentable little book of verse called *Fugitive Pieces*, by a certain Mrs. Dodsworth, 1802. One of her solemn elegies begins

Methinks I hear the slow and deep-toned bell  
Tolling dear KNATCHBULL to her early grave.

But then I doubt if even Milton could have written with dignity, hampered by such a name. Mrs. Dodsworth writes a really sincere poem on the death of her father—and of all measures chooses that with which Lewis Carroll afterwards immortalized Old Father William.

My Father, dear man! whom I honoured and loved  
Took due pains to instruct my young mind,  
And if e'er he with fondness confessed he approved,  
I (with rapture) exclaimed, O how kind!

Treated in a certain spirit, even a door knocker can become romantic, there hovers about the meanest of them the tortured ghost of Gruffanuff. But a bad medium can make sincerity ridiculous

Blithe voices then so dear  
Send up their shouts once more,  
Then sounds again on memory's ear  
The dear old knocker on the door!

To spend the *sæva indignatio* of Swift in an Essay on Unpunctuality is as absurd as to go to a funeral in pyjamas original only in the sense that no one else does it. Silly in the sense that everyone could do it if he thought it worth while.

Atherton Furlong, *Echoes of Memory*

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

### 4. QUOTATION

An inapposite quotation is very much worse than no quotation at all. The use of quotation, a failing of all minds moving in orbits remote from life, is subject often to abuse. If a man really is able to be imaginatively free, to be like Lamb in his walks at Oxford "in moods of humility a sizar or servitor, and, when the peacock vein rises, strut a gentleman commoner, or in graver moments a master of arts," quotation or allusion will spring unbidden to his pen. I have come to the conclusion that quotation is not really a virtue: it is a disease—though sometimes it is possible to make a virtue even of disease. Both Bacon and Burton quote copiously, sometimes well, sometimes for effect—for the sake of quoting. To quote for quotation's sake, or in order to impress others with a learning that only exists on paper, is to be insincere. Quotation should be used as the *mot juste* is used,<sup>1</sup> when it is the most perfect means of putting the writer's thoughts into words or of illustrating his meaning. To quote tritely—to refer to Mr Micawber hoping for something to turn up, or to the willingness of Barkis, to use stale phrases like "confusion worse confounded" or "music hath charms" (particularly without having read *Macbeth* or the *Mourning Bride*), is to commit the unforgivable cliché, to talk through the mouths of others, not through humility, but through laziness. Foreign quotations—except where there is no English equivalent, as in such exquisite phrases as "ballon d'essai" or "l'esprit d'escalier"—are as bad as outworn fragments of Shakespeare. You will sound as though you had been "at a feast of languages and stolen the scraps." If you must allude, allude

<sup>1</sup> Except, of course, in such a work as this, where there can be no representation without quotation

## *On Revising the Essay*

to the fresh rather than to the stale. To say that Mr Smith is like the curate's egg, good in parts, is to be neither witty, vivid, nor original. The simile had far better be left out. It has long since ceased to add anything to the picture of Mr Smith's moral complexity.

### 5 GENERALIZATION

There are a few of the elementary faults of style which are promising faults—faults that reveal a superfluity of energy or an imagination not wholly in control. Of such are the use of the longest possible word, the use of the complicated adjectival sentence, of periphrases, bad metaphors, even Malapropisms.

It at least *sounds* a trifle better to be cloudy than to be concise. It is not very easy to see at first that vividness has been sacrificed to dignity—and dignity deserves no sacrifices. It is a simple and fairly consistent rule to prefer the particular to the general, the picture to the mere phrase. Ainsworth and the novelists of the school of G. P. R. James used continually to speak of "a certain individual" when they really meant (and would have done much better to say) George or Edward. The Generalization is as tempting as it is dangerous. Occasionally it becomes inevitable. But it is far better, if a writer wishes to point out that literature becomes superficial as it becomes universal and is spread over a wider area, for him to particularize, and to write

When ten thousand boarding-school girls, who have learnt to play on the piano, are brought out in the same season, Rossini will be preferred to Mozart.—HAZLITT

The men of the Middle Ages were right. It is only by the concrete that a real fact can be expressed. Lust and Gluttony and the devil are names. They mean to us the Sex Complex,

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

the Hunger Urge, or that part in ourselves which is but a remote permutation of the baser elements of our ancestral chromosomes. But to the Middle Ages they meant real figures. Gluttony was a man with a round belly, with dim eyes and a great staff, born "of a gammon of bacon and a Hog's-head of Claret wine." Lust was a green-eyed monster, black with grime and riding upon a goat, and the Devil was a Satyr with horns and a tail and a great whip. They preferred the particular to the general.

The use of the Passive is akin to the Generalization in this respect. The Passive is vague, cloudy. "A man was seen" is a very much more indeterminate and cautious phrase than "I saw a man." A fable can give point and vividness to an empty generalization explaining the advantages of the country over the town. Herein is the poetry of the proverb. No essay can be free from generalization, but the generalization cannot stand alone, it asks for illustration by the concrete and the particular. The deductive method is to make a series of general statements and to illustrate them by a series of particulars. That is the method of Bacon. To begin with an anecdote, and to pass from that to a series of generalizations is the method of more modern essayists. To particularize—to write in pictures—is to hit with a hammer instead of a cushion. If we were to write "The good qualities of a man are chiefly brought out by adversity," we should be dull and cloudy beside such a sentence as: "Certainly, Vertue is like pretious Odours, most fragrant when they are incensed or crushed." And if we wanted to say that poetry no longer finds patrons, could we say more than those two lines of Spenser's:

But ah! Maecenas is ywraapt in clay,  
And great Augustus long ago is dead?

## On Revising the Essay

It is the use of the Abstract Thought which is as much to be avoided as the misuse of the Abstract Word. I have said Be simple, be clear, and there are not many essentially simple abstracts. Lack of clear thinking means obscurity in expression. In the quotation below the fault is a certain muzziness, due to two things. The writer has not been clear in his own mind as to what effect he wants to produce, he knows only that he wants to stir some sort of emotion, and he has tried to do this by loading his brush with colour and splashing it all on the canvas.

*As Jane Porter opened her eyes to a realization of the again imminent peril which threatened her her brave young heart gave up at last its final vestige of hope, and she turned to grope for the fallen weapon that she might mete to herself a merciful death ere the cruel fangs tore into her fair flesh — Targan of the Apes*

### 6. JOHNSONESE

The force of Nature can no further go. Which leads one to the consideration of another promising fault, the tendency to overload. In extreme youth this overloading—periphrases, circumlocution, Johnsonese—is a sign of too rich a mind, in maturity it is barrenness of thought attempting to obfuscate its inadequacy by smothering itself under a catafalque of unnecessary verbiage.

"'Tis an admirable thing," remarks Dorothy Osborne: to see how some people will labour to find out terms that may obscure a plain sense. Like a gentleman I knew, who would never say the weather grew cold but that winter began to salute us. I have no patience for such coxcombs, and cannot blame an old uncle of mine that threw the standish at his man's head because he writ a letter for him where, instead of saying



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

(as his master bid him), that 'he would have writ himself, but that he had the gout in his hand', he said 'that the gout in his hand would not permit him to put pen to paper.' The fellow thought that he had mended it mightily, and that putting pen to paper was much better than plain writing "

A reporter wishes to state that it was sunny for the vicar's garden fête, and that everyone enjoyed himself. What he actually wrote was this:

As to the insistent detail of weather, it was about the absolute perfectitude we can remember, with genial warm sunshine tempered most agreeably by the north-western breezes. Such conditions made everyone concerned all the happier than usual, and it would be hard to match anywhere on this globe the picture of unalloyed human happiness over which that happiest dispenser of happiness our rural dean presides in his own Arcadian domain —From a local paper

This is the little fish talking like a whale; it is committing the sin against Simplicity. It is like those lines:

Let Observation with extensive view  
Survey mankind from China to Peru,

which, as Coleridge points out, is merely saying: "Let Observation, with extensive observation, observe mankind." So impressive is mere sound. The power of the Alchemist lay as much in his polysyllables as in his retorts and skeletons, and it was by his words that Subtle managed so successfully to impose on Sir Epicure Mammon:

I exalt our med'cine  
By hanging him *in balneo vaporoso*  
And giving him solution; then congeal him;  
And then dissolve him, then again congeal him<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, II 1

## On Revising the Essay

Palabras, neighbour Verges, palabras! But Wisdom always speaks simply and when a man dresses up his thoughts in long words one is apt to suspect that the thoughts themselves might resemble Thackeray's picture of Louis XIV.

'For most abstract terms are shadows that conceal a void.'<sup>1</sup> The big word is not dignified, it is pompous and pomposity bears the same relationship to dignity as facetiousness to humour, or sentimentality to sentiment. Clara Reeve only succeeds in becoming ridiculous when she most wishes to be affecting.

During this speech, the tears made themselves channels down Edward's cheeks and his two noble auditors, catching the tender infection, wiped their eyes at the conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

And Boswell is perfectly serious when he remarks that Johnson could warble the amorous lay with facility and elegance"—as serious as Johnson himself when he remarked that the *Beggar's Opera* had in it such a "labefaction of all principles as may be injurious to the morality. His audience smothered a laugh" it was not the remark they laughed at, but the word "labefaction, which seeks to dress up a perfectly sensible statement in absurdly pompous words, "swelling out an unmeaning truism to a perfect tympany of style." Hazlitt calls these "hieroglyphical writers", and O. W. Holmes has mocked the Grand Style in lines which are scarcely more absurd than some sentences from early nineteenth-century novels.

Incandescent ire the solar splendour flames  
The foles, languescent, pend from arid rames  
His humid front the clve, anhelng, wipes,  
And dreams of errng on ventiferous ripes.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

The talk of By Ends in *Pilgrim's Progress* is the talk of the journalistic soul who thinks that a fine phrase atones for small matter. Among the early editions of the *Lives of the Poets* are the following corrections: "Every sheet enabled him to write the next *with less trouble*," altered to "with more facility." "Society *is so named emphatically in opposition* to a state of nature," altered to "politically regulated is a state contra-distinguished from. . . ." "Kindness" is changed to "benevolence"; "very extensive" to "individiously great", "more drawn from life" to "of nearer alliance to life" "Zeal" becomes "ardour," "work" becomes "production" When the style comes naturally, as it often does with Johnson, it is majestic. The *Letter to Lord Chesterfield* is a theme strongly felt and nobly worded, simplicity is there because the thought and feeling are alike vigorous and sincere. Fine phraseology is a form of literary hypocrisy. Sir Joshua Reynolds gave a shout of laughter when, during a reading of Grainger's poem the *Sugar Cane*, he came to the line, "Now, Muse, let's sing of rats!" But that bald simplicity was transformed to

Nor with less waste the whiskered vermin race,  
A countless clan, despoil the lowland cane

Such is the language of the tombstone—the artificial phrases that are only engraved to flatter less virtuous relations. Literary euphemism is well enough in its place, whether it be a tombstone or an official biography, but it has nothing to do with Literature. "My dear man, clear your mind of cant," said Doctor Johnson. "You may *talk* in this manner . . . but don't *think* foolishly." <sup>1</sup>

I came across somewhere a quotation from an old *Book*

<sup>1</sup> Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 1 766

## On Revising the Essay

of *Etiquette for Ladies*, which illustrates the effect of Johnsonese on the most tragic of tales

I remember the Count M——, *one of the most accomplished and handsomest young men in Vienna*. When I was there, he was passionately in love with a girl of *almost peerless beauty*. She was lively and amiable, and treated them all with an affability which kept them in her train, although it was generally known that she had avowed a predilection for Count M——, and that preparations were making for their nuptials. The Count was of refined mind and delicate sensibility. He loved her for her sake alone, and, like a lover of such perfections, he never approached her without timidity and when he touched her a fire shot through his veins that warned him not to invade the vermillion sanctuary of her lips.

Such were his feelings, when one night at his intended father-in-law's a party of young people were met to celebrate a certain festival. Forfeits were one of the pastimes, and all went on with the greatest merriment, till the Count was commanded by some witty mademoiselle to redeem his glove by saluting the cheek of his intended bride. The Count blushed, trembled, advanced to his mistress, retreated, advanced again—and at last, with a tremor that shook every fibre in his frame, with a modest grace he put the soft ringlet which played upon her cheek to his lips, and retired to demand his pledge in evident confusion.

(At which moment another man attempted to snatch a kiss from the lady.)

And the Count had the mortification, the agony to see the lips which his passionate and delicate love would not allow him to touch, kissed with roughness and repetition by another

Now, Muse, let's sing of rats!

### 7 COLLOQUIALISM

Fine phrases are only justified if they come unbidden: if the style has to be put on like a cloak, deliberately, it is no style at all. Correct English, says George Eliot, "is the

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

slang of prigs" For ordinary purposes—and an essay is an ordinary purpose—style should be neither too rich nor too barren. Colloquialism is a virtue if it has force, pungency, behind it. A conversational tone brings ideas to men's business and bosoms, renders them actual. But it can very easily degenerate into mere vulgarity, into a style which is no style at all. Lamb's is a familiar style, sometimes even conversational, it is never a monologue. For if one attempts to imitate speech in writing, one imitates too the faults of speech. A real conversation, faithfully reported, is intolerably repetitive, crowded with aposiopeses. A colloquial style becomes very rapidly a style full of dashes, exclamation marks, and underlinings.

Fine works are the product of spiritual delight, not of honest intentions. He who always called a spade a spade would be a sincere man, and might be an admirable man, but never a good writer, for the proper and adequate word is not really sufficient in good writing. It is not enough to be clear and make yourself understood, you must please, fascinate, and spread illusions before all your readers . . .<sup>1</sup>

In speech the mere inflections of the voice can suggest nuances impossible to convey in writing. An exclamation mark in real life is the lifting of an eyebrow; italics are intonations; and adverbs and adjectives are gestures. The legitimate methods of emphasis in prose are seldom the use of italics or a servile dependence on punctuation. Emphasis is produced by short sentences or short words, by accumulation of epithet or phrase, by inversion, or by placing the emphatic word first or last. All these devices are illustrated by the following passage:

Day followed day, and still that horrible music did not cease

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<sup>1</sup> Joubert, *Pensées*

## *On Revising the Essay*

Night followed night, and still the deadly work went on there was no sleep and no darkness the Romans lighted houses that they might see to kill.

Six days passed thus and only the citadel was left. It was a steep rock in the middle of the town, a temple of the God of Healing crowned its summit.

The rock was covered with people who could be seen extending their arms to heaven, and uniting with one another in the last embrace. Their piteous lamentations, like the cries of wounded animals, ascended in the air and behind the iron circle which enclosed them could be heard the crackling of the fire and the dull boom of falling beams.

The soldiers were weary with smiting. They were filled with blood. Nine-tenths of the inhabitants had already been killed. The people on the rock were offered their lives they descended with bare hands and passed under the yoke. Some of them ended their days in prison. The greater part were sold as slaves.

Much of the effect of this passage is gained by apparent anti-climax, the packed simplicity of the final paragraph following in immediate contrast to the sonority, solemnity, and colour of the opening. There are no exclamations, italics, or rhetorical questions, one such would ruin the whole effect. It is one of the rare occasions in the *Martyrdom of Man* where Winwood Reade restrains his love of verbiage. Most of his purple patches are failures, but (because he could so easily have said more) this, for once, comes off. Colloquialism has its splendid uses. The most moving death scene in literature is described by an old landlady. The pathos of speech is often more affecting than the pathos of dignified prose as the death of Captain Trunnion is more affecting than that of Paul Dombey. Those few words of Tony Weller placed beside the last utterances of Paul or Little Nell show to how great an extent pathos and emphasis are matters of Restraint.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

"Susan," I says, "you've been a wery good vife to me altogether, don't say nothing at all about it, keep a good heart, my dear, and you'll live to see me punch that 'ere Stiggins's head yet She smiled at this, Samivel," said the old gentleman, stifling a sigh with his pipe, "but she died arter all!"—*Pickwick Papers*

It is noticeable that Dickens fails most often when he appears to be trying his hardest In this passage there is no evidence of the author—but he wept tears of genuine emotion over the fading of Nell . . .

### 8. EUPHEMISM

Colloquialism, looseness of speech, leads inevitably to looseness of thought, to the use of the Old Inevitable and the Unspeakable Modifier The Old Inevitable is the adjective that is attached as closely to a particular noun as her lamb was to Mary. Wherever appears the word "edifice" there also appears the epithet "sacred" A gruelling half-hour spent with the local newspaper will reveal dozens of young men immaculately clad, or women with wayward curls and the complexion of a peach The use of the inevitable adjective is only another example of thinking through other people's minds It is never easy to find the *mot juste*—sometimes it is found, and then sticks to some particular word A face is deathly pale, or white as a sheet, and "'tis enough, 'twill serve" It is too much trouble to be exact. It is much too easy to use the modifier and call something "rather good" in order to save oneself the trouble of defining a vague impression But the stale epithet is the epithet that has lost its colour, and a phrase that has been well rubbed by use ceases at length to convey any meaning at all

"There is something more than conventionality, there

## *On Revising the Essay*

is modesty of language. I speak probably just like a woman, but I use metaphors and sentences so arranged that in saying a thing I seem not to allude to it. It is as though instead of saying my panting, I were to say "The thing I have done. Never have I made use of the words 'Lover, Mistress, Liaison' that is to say, of those exact and customary terms which give you the appearance of speaking of things familiar to you. It is, of course, understood that one knows it all, but one glides over it."<sup>1</sup>

Here, in the mouth of one of the most tragically unconventional women of the eighties, is the defence of Euphemism.

One glides over it. "Euphemism is a form of literary cowardice. It is the clarification of the expedient, and only justifiable as an expedient. Sensible enough in days when even inanimate things were thought malignant, the euphemism has become a slavish superstition. It is a modesty, a false delicacy that reaches the ridiculous when trousers are spoken of as sit-upons, ineffables, "unwhisperables", or bulls referred to as gentlemen cows." When Thackeray wants to make Harry Warrington say "Whore," he is forced to use such a circumlocution as, 'He referred to her by a name which occurs in Shakespeare's *Othello*.'"<sup>2</sup> An inoffensive word like "blooming" is used for an offensive word like "bloody", and the final fate of the original word is that it drops entirely out of use. Fielding would never have dared to call Sophia a blooming girl in the twentieth century. To be so wary of calling a spade a spade that you come to call it a fork, is not only to transfer the odium to a new word, but to act a conscious hypocrisy



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Edwin, at a rickety fancy desk, began to write: "Dear James, my father passed peacefully away at——" Then with an abrupt movement, he tore the sheet in two, and threw it in the fire, and began again. "Dear James, my father died quietly at eight o'clock to-night."—ARNOLD BENNETT, *Clayhanger*, xvii.

### 9. CONTRAST

But there are aids as well as pitfalls. For the Writer is an Adventurer; he is a knight who seeks the shrine of beauty. Grim perils await him by the way. Not least of these is the Great White Worm, which spits at him from the hedgerow a vomit of forbidden words, and, poking a wicked head through the leaves, husses. "A nice day! A wonderful day! Glorious—and marvellous—and superb!" Or, hidden in some viscous pool, he may chance upon the sinister, green-slimed Toad which is called the Modifier, and which is nearly always almost quite, or the Old Inevitable (that hairy Spider) may croak at him as he rides by. "Cheering Beverage! Succulent Bivalve!"

But the Knight has his weapons, too, against the fiends of Darkness. At his side hangs the vorpal sword of Simile; the shield of Sincerity blazes on his arm; Metaphor, his dagger, is a bright and bitter blade. Proudly defiant, he sits astride his old horse Common Sense.

In the above I have illustrated the misuse of what are known as Literary Devices. In truth, no one uses these consciously. No writer stops in the middle of a paragraph to reflect that it is high time he employed Chiasmus, or rendered his sentence more vivid by a judicious asyndeton. Browning did not know he was using anaphora in the *Pied Piper*, he was merely conscious that the passage about the rats would be far more striking if the word rats occurred

## On Revising the Essay

again and again, he realized the obvious—that the best way of emphasizing a word is to repeat it over and over. That, I think, is the important thing about literary devices, that they are scarcely worth learning laboriously by heart, since immediately they are used consciously they become self-conscious—and therefore lose their value. Until a writer has learnt the virtue of simplicity, it is useless for him to learn the virtue of decoration. The rule in all writing is excision and it will be often found that the removal of a metaphor or a simile strengthens rather than weakens a paragraph. Greek architecture has, like the style of Swift, no ornament that does not contribute to the beauty of the whole. The function of the pillar is not only to do its work, but to look as though it were doing it. The baroque in literature suffers from the same faults as the baroque in architecture, and the chief fault of each is a tendency towards over-elaboration, ornament for effect only. It is no help to create the ornament before the pillar. It is only where the background is firm and simple that decoration adds anything at all.

It is partly for that reason and partly because the ordinary devices—Simile, Metaphor, and the rest—have been dealt with so often before that I have relegated them to a remote appendix, where only the inquiring or laborious need disturb their ashes.

But the use of contrast is too important to be thus easily dismissed. It is one of the few things that are antidotes to dullness, that daughter of Chaos and eternal Night. Contrast is the very principle of life, no work of art can live if it lacks variety in the sentence or the theme. If you want to create an impression of sunlight, you emphasize shadow. There is a picture of De Hooch's, called *La Collation*, which

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

has always seemed to me as full of the light and heat of the sun as anything of Turner's. And yet half of it is in the profoundest gloom. Beyond the hall where the banqueters make merry is an archway opening on to the street: outside is a white blaze of sunshine, and a musician lolls, a dark shadow, in the centre of the doorway. The only colour inside the room is the orange on the table and the answering sombre flame of a woman's dress. Action is followed by reaction. In the moonlight Prince Andrew meditates on the old oak outside his window, till it seems to symbolize for him all the buried and forgotten actions of his life. "Austerlitz, with the lofty heavens, and his wife's dead, reproachful face, and Pierre at the ferry; and the girl excited by the beauty of the night, and that night itself, and the moon, and . . . all these suddenly rushed to his mind." And the Princess enters the study. "My dear," she says, "little Nicholas can't go out to-day, it is very cold."<sup>1</sup> That is what we call Realism, Contrast. Light can only be appreciated beside Shadow: Beauty is the more beautiful beside the Beast. All the supreme works in literature illustrate this principle, whether it be a mad king on a deserted heath in an atmosphere of tragedy and storm, listening to the babblings of his fool, or whether it be the jests of an old porter in a house of death. *Richard the Second* is a bad play, because it lacks the essential contrast of humour—even of ironic humour. All the greatest tragedies of Shakespeare are full of the contrast called Irony. This can never be taught. It is only the supreme artist who, after writing that amazing chapter where old Osborne learns of George's marriage to Amelia and sits up all night in terrible reverie over the great red Family Bible,<sup>2</sup> can write:

<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

<sup>2</sup> Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

## On Revising the Essay

It was morning already as he went up to bed, the whole house was alight with sunshine and the birds were singing among the fresh green leaves of Berkeley Square.

To all our actions thought sends its ironic accompaniment. The children play hide and seek among the gravestones while the body is lowered into the earth. The mourners ride back with solemn faces, and their thoughts, like little uncontrollable familiars, make havoc inside their heads. The artist can appreciate and set down this *doubleness* of fact and thought. There is contrast in action—but there is also contrast in the recording of action. If variety of theme is a matter for the artist, variety of manner is the triumph of the technician. Even the sentence must contain contrast if it is to live. The style of Macaulay, cold and glittering as it is, owes all its reputation to its cunning variations in length and rhythm. A too perfect balance and symmetry makes the *Letters of Junius* dull enough to read to-day for all their epigrams. And I always feel that the very perfection of Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* has made it monotonous and a trifle too long. Gray could not manage the caesura. Milton varies it indefinitely for ten thousand lines.

### 10. SIMPLICITY AND RESTRAINT

Clarity is gained by the use of the exact word, which is the result of clear, logical thinking, and clear thinking means Simplicity

While others fish with craft for great opinion,  
I with great truth catch mere simplicity  
While some with cunning gild their copper crowns,  
With truth and plainness I do wear mine bare.  
Fear not my truth the moral of my wit  
Is "plain and true" that's all the reach of it.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Journallese and pomposity, and most of the other vices of writing, are due either to a lack of clear thought (which leads to loss of simplicity) or to a lack of true feeling (which leads to insincerity and false rhetoric). Affecting an emotion which is not genuine is the origin of all euphemism or circumlocution. A man writes a letter of consolation on the death of a remote relative, and tries to work up the semblance of passionate grief. His letter will be turgid and rhetorical, even sentimental. He will refer to the bosom of Abraham and quote Ecclesiastes. "Affectation in style," says Schopenhauer, "is like making faces." It is neither beautiful nor dignified. There is no denying the truth of the emotion of Bunyan, or the sincerity of the authors of the *New Testament*, because the proof of their feeling lies in the simplicity of the stories of Apollyon or the prodigal son.

The style fits the subject. It must rise as the theme rises (but it is the theme which must swell the style); it must rise inevitably, as it does in the pages of Sir Thomas Browne, or here and there in the magnificent melodies of Milton and De Quincey. As a rule, the more charged with emotion a man is, the more simply he expresses himself. Tony Weller knew that the mention of a classical goddess is fatal to the path of true love, for real emotion is never more than half articulate. "There ain't no callin' names in it—no Wenuses, nor nothin' o' that kind." The deeper the feeling, the more monosyllabic the expression, which is the reason why the love-scene in *Richard Feverel* is so much more convincing than that in *Dorian Gray*. Restraint will convince more than a thousand superlatives. It is because only a quarter is told that the last scene in *King Lear* is more moving than the crowded horrors of *Tamburlane*. Each line is full of emotion, because each line tells so little, to leave implied so much.

## On Revising the Essay

People are afraid to put down what is common on paper, they seek to embellish their narratives, as they think, by philosophic speculations and reflections they are anxious to shine, and people who are anxious to shine can never tell a plain story "So I went with them to a music booth, where they made me almost drunk with gin, and began to talk their flash language, which I did not understand," says, or is made to say, Henry Simma, executed at Tyburn some seventy years before the time of which I am speaking. I have always looked upon this sentence as a master piece of the narrative style, it is so concise and yet so very clear —BORROW *Lavengro*, chapter xxxvi.

Mrs. Shelley's ambition was to write a ghost story, a story which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart." It is an elementary law in the technique of the short story that the more fantastic an event may be, the more soberly should it be recounted. Even Wells's Martians and Selenites convince us by the very restraint with which they are depicted. And yet Mrs. Shelley tries to thrill by sentences even more exclamatory than the worst lapses of Edgar Poe

A shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch!—*Frankenstein*.

And yet how much more effective is horror described simply and without comment. Barry Pain, I remember, in a book called *Curiosities*, has occasion to describe a headless ghost sitting at a writing table. He says

It was a man in evening dress with a terribly white shirt-front

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

that bulged out from his waist-coat, the hands hung down the sides of the chair, coarse and fat What made the thing horrible was the stained cloth over the neck There was no head

It is classic simplicity of this kind which makes a good ghost story, and how much longer than all the adjectives of the School of Terror does one remember Tannhauser's cry of "Elizabeth!" or Hamlet's "What! the fair Ophelia!" "Sweets to the sweet, farewell!"

There are more thrills packed into six verses of the fourth chapter of *Job* than into six chapters of the average detective story. The weakness of Poe is his lack of this tragic simplicity, and the closing paragraphs of *Ligeia* are unconvincing beside this

The house of Shaws stood five full stories high, not counting lofts Well, as I advanced, it seemed to me the stair grew airier and a thought more lightsome, and I was wondering what might be the cause of this change, when a second blink of the summer lightning came and went If I did not cry out, it was because fear had me by the throat, and if I did not fall, it was more by Heaven's mercy than my own strength It was not only that the flash shone in on every side through breaches in the wall, so that I seemed to be clambering aloft upon an open scaffold, but the same passing brightness showed me the steps were of unequal length, and that one of my feet rested that moment within two inches of the well —STEVENSON, *Kidnapped*, chapter iv

Had Stevenson not felt his subject fully, he would have written rhetoric like Clara Reeve or Mrs. Shelley. In striving to render his expression adequate to his theme, he would have succeeded merely in becoming tawdry. A tawdry, pompous affair is Gray's *Bard* Beside the tenderness, simplicity, and restraint of *How Sleep the Brave?* it is but a metrical exercise.

The absolute simplicity and mastery over meaning and

## On Revising the Essay

expression is found only in the greatest writers—in the Bible, in Bunyan, in Swift. The theatre is the chief trap. The intrinsic unreality of the stage tends to foster false rhetoric. In a play the important points of the plot must be stressed more than in a book, where the reader can turn back the pages to refresh his memory. And all playwrights, even Shakespeare, fall at times into the trap and over-emphasize. True rhetoric is the Grand Style—the style in which the close of *Alton Locke*, or the purple patches of De Quincey, or some of the greatest parts of the Old Testament are written. It is emotion finding its true expression. Simplicity is clarity and gorgeousness does not necessarily imply obscurity.

### II RHYTHM<sup>1</sup>

Rhythm is the most evasive and indefinable attribute of style. Stephen laboriously defines it as the first formal aesthetic relation of part to part in any aesthetic whole, or of an aesthetic whole to its part or parts, or of any part to the aesthetic whole of which it is a part.<sup>2</sup> It is a word that can be applied intelligibly to a picture, a piece of music, a statue, a poem, a sentence. It is present in the music of marching feet but it is present also in the action of a good bowler, an irregular yet harmonious series of movements. In literature it means the swing, the measured movement, the *swell* of a sentence or verse. It is a matter purely of sound and of the arrangement of sound. No one can fully appreciate rhythm till he reads aloud, for ultimately it depends on the choice of words. Such a word as "ululate" will occur in a

See Appendix II.

James Joyce, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Man*



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

sombre, sonorous sentence, for it is in itself a sombre and sonorous word. The mere sound of it is melancholy, quite apart from its meaning. Alter the word "booming" to "ringing," "honour" to "revere," "brotherly" to "fraternal," and you alter not only the shade of meaning, but also the sound (and therefore the rhythm) of the whole sentence. This untranslatable music is not to be taught; its secret is hidden somewhere in the disposition of cadence, sound, and stress. The ordinary man might say, "The head that wears a crown uneasy lies"; the poet says "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Both are iambic pentameters: the difference lies in the quality of the rhythm. To rhythm belongs the magic of such sentences as "And the rain fell, and falling it was rain, and having fallen it was blood"<sup>1</sup> "One line of Euripides made mad the citizens of Abdera"<sup>2</sup> To change the word "mad," or to place it first or last would ruin the rhythm of the whole sentence. By things so small as these do the incantations lose their power.

Such rhythmic inversions are only literary affectations, if they are done obviously, as so often in the prose of Ronald Firbank. "Hear singing the lark above my head" is an intolerably artificial sentence, it betrays the literary touch, lacks simplicity. It is only the gracious spirit of Max Beerbohm which can support a style with fantastic whimsy so implected — "to force from little tubes of lead a glutinous flamboyance, and to defile, with the hair of a camel therein steeped, taut canvas, is hardly the diversion of a gentleman. . . ."<sup>3</sup> When Matthew Arnold writes, "Shelley was a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain,"<sup>4</sup> the inversion and alliteration create an exquisite "falling

<sup>1</sup> E. A. Poe, *Silence, a Fable*

<sup>2</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Cabala*

<sup>3</sup> *Dandies and Dandies*

<sup>4</sup> *Essays In Criticism*, Series II.

## On Revising the Essay

rhythm. There are crisp rhythms "His unspeakable attendants leapt like frogs,"<sup>1</sup> or there are sonorous and slowly moving rhythms, like the "Trajan's column" of Milton's prose, or some of the magnificent phrases of Isaiah—"Woe to the land shadowing with wings, "The burden of the desert of the sea," "The burden of the valley of vision", (excellent examples of the satisfactory use of consecutive genitives).

Great prose must contain a certain irregularity or variety of rhythm. The period is monotonous, unless the swell and ebb of the music is varied, as it is varied so subtly in Gibbon, Burke, Macaulay, Stevenson. The passage quoted below is bad, because the rhythm is too regular, it borders closely on the rhythm of verse.

The thousand arms of the forest were grey and its million fingers silver. In a sky of dark-green blue, like slate, the stars were bleak and brilliant.<sup>2</sup>

It is a more or less regular anapaestic couplet. When Jerome K. Jerome becomes emotional, he has a tendency also (as we all do) to become too rhythmical,<sup>3</sup> and to write bad verse in his purple patches.

They awe us, these strange stars, so cold, so clear  
We are as children, whose small feet have strayed  
Into some dim-lit temple of the god  
They have been taught to worship but know not  
And standing where the echoing dome  
Spans the long vistas of the shadowy night,  
Glance up half hoping, half afraid  
To see some awful vision hovering there.<sup>4</sup>

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J. B. Cabell, *Jurgen*.

G. K. Chesterton, *Innocence of Father Brown*.

<sup>1</sup> "In general, warm people, as poets naturally are, speak usually in blank verse."—Sterne, *Memorabilia*, Part III.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

A stray line of verse creeps often enough into the best writing. Even in Landor there are such lines as "I trod again the dust of Posilipo, soft as the feathers in the wings of Sleep."<sup>1</sup> But it is not often (outside *Lorna Doone*) one can find in twenty lines of prose no less than sixteen lines of irreproachable blank verse . . .

The only way in which one can gain a sense of prose rhythm is by learning off by heart passages of the Bible, or of Ruskin, Pater, Sir Thomas Browne, and by attempting to imitate their surge and swell of sound. In this way the learning of prose is more important than the learning of verse. It would be strange if a man wrote ill whose constant study was the Bible or the Plays of Shakespeare.

### 12. COLOUR

Apart from rhythm, the second ingredient in the giving of delight is colour. Passages in prose can give the same ecstasy that some pictures give. There are paragraphs and verses as rich and jewelled as the walls and thrones Crivelli so loved to paint, or as full of a clear, pearly light as the quiet spaces of Vermeer.

To the west the mist thinned and was like pale water. Upon it, with delicate dignity, the trees floated, like water-birds of faerie, gravely and magically tinted. Some were brown-green, like grebes, others of the ashy tint of coots, the soft grey of cygnets. The chestnuts where the sun struck them were like sheldrakes with their deep bronzes, and the beeches had the glossy green of teal. The white sea was populous with these faery creatures, floating head under wing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Imaginary Conversations, The Dream of Boccaccio*

<sup>2</sup> Mary Webb, *The House in Dormer Forest*, chapter xxi

## On Revising the Essay

Colour in writing, like colour in painting, may be crude, over-gorgeous. The scenery may as often become blurred through too much colour, as vague through too little.

The little clouds that, like ravelled skeins of glossy white silk, were drifting across the hollowed turquoise of the summer sky

This sentence wants to contrast white and blue, but the two colours are confused by a multiplicity of adjectives. It would be more simple, more rhythmic, and more strictly colourful if half the epithets were omitted. The clouds that, like skeins of white silk, were drifting through the hollowed turquoise of the sky "

Here are four adjectives omitted out of six. This is writing showy, specious, and calculated to allure young persons, like Mrs. Battle's opinion of Quadrille. A gorgeousness of colour at first dazzles the judgment

All the trees, metal-green, jewel-green, dawn-green, splashed and flecked with rose and mooned over with patines of cream-colour. The bird-cherries sent down peace in pale flakes the steep, vivid slopes where cool chicory-coloured shadows blossomed, were all swimming in oxe-eyed daisies, white as the wake of a ship.—MARY WESS.

The passage is overdone, the colour laid on too thickly but it is a genuine attempt to translate that colour into words. If half the adjectives were omitted, little would be lost and the mind more free to wander. *Reticence is always a stimulant.* There are few phrases more full of suggestion than Blake's forests of the Night, and on what pathless journeyings does not the imagination travel beyond the circle of grey crags that surrounds the Virgin of Leonardo?

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* chapter I.

## IV

### ON DESCRIPTION

A GOOD description is like an accurate *mot juste* expanded. Aesthetic description is on the borderland of poetry, and uses for its own ends the legitimate devices of the poets. For it is possible to describe in a sentence the note of a clock or the call of the cuckoo. Mary Webb has done both: "The eight-day wall-clock of inlaid oak, with the soothing tick and the chime that sounded as if it were made of pale gold, was rich with satiny polish." "Late sound the cuckoo's two mellow bells." These are small things. But a sunset is too large and too complex to come within the limits of a single sentence, however inflated or superlative. We must therefore try to translate as far as possible our emotions and perceptions into words—into exact, precise, colourful words—analysing and interpreting our own feelings.

The first rule is Unity. Like a picture, the object described must be looked at from a single point of view, a point of view that remains consistent; and every detail must bear relation to the whole. There should be one dominant focus or impression left on the mind of the reader, not a crowd of mixed or irrelevant facts. In Pollaiuolo's famous picture of St. Sebastian, the crouching figures in the foreground throw into sharp contrast the dominant and erect form of the saint, the crest of a pyramid of figures. Nothing in the picture destroys the essential unity of the whole, and every part leads the eye towards the focus. To shift the point of view renders the picture kaleidoscopic, of advantage only when (as so often in *Anna Karenina* or *Vanity Fair*) the

## On Description

things described are confused, or when the writer's object is to create an impression of confusion. Exercise in description should begin with the small things, like the bumble-bee which Alpha of the Plough describes as "adding the boom of his double bass to the melody, as he goes in his heavy, blustering way from blossom to blossom." Gradually the view may be widened—a corner of the room, a glade in a wood, a view from a window, a panorama from the crest of a mountain. But nothing should appear unless it can actually be seen by the writer. In the eighth chapter of *Wintersmoon*, Hugh Walpole sees a wedding through the eyes of an old charwoman named Mrs. Beddoes. Never once does he alter the point of view in order to remark on something Mrs. Beddoes would not have seen. Unity and consistency render the picture clear.

In the passage I here quote from Huysmans' *La Cathédrale*, unity is achieved by making the light the point of view; consistency, a *wholeness* of impression, by allowing that light to penetrate gradually throughout the entire building.

The genius of the middle ages had devised the skilful and pious lighting of this edifice, and harmonized with its windows the ascending march of day. The walls and the aisles were very dark: the daylight crept mysteriously subdued along the body of the church. It was lost in the stained glass, checked by dark bishops and opaque saints, completely filling the dusky bordered windows with the dead hues of a Persian rug: the panes absorbed the sun's rays, refracting none, arrested the powdered gold of the sunbeams in the dull violet of purple egg-fruit, the tawny browns of tinder or tan, the too-blue greens and the wine-coloured red, stained with soot, like the thick juice of mulberries. As it reached the chancel, the light came in through brighter and clearer colours, through the blue of translucent sapphires, through pale rubies, brilliant yellow and crystalline white. The gloom was relieved

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

beyond the transepts near the altar. Even in the centre of the cross the sun pierced clearer glass, less storied with figures, and bordered with almost colourless panes that admitted it freely.

This passage illustrates an important point: the selection of detail. Everyone sees the same things, it is only Sherlock Holmes who sees their significance. The eye is a selective organ. Writing is a wholly selective process. It is the little things which are the important things, and, more important than anything else, the way in which they are welded together into a whole. Huysmans wishes to give an impression of gloom and colour. To pick out minute details would have spoiled the effect of dimness, richness. Merely to have spoken of huge pillars, aisles, and lightless glooms would have rendered the picture majestic but vague, like Milton's account of the Lake of Brimstone. So he begins his first sentence by stating his "theme detail"—light. He then goes on to paint a broad impression of the interior—the walls and the aisles—at the same time giving his subsidiary theme, the subdued richness of the lighting. He moves up the church, past the statues to the windows, on which (realizing how much they contribute to the theme) he dwells at length, restating the light and the richness of colouring. Chancel, transept, altar—and finally the cross, his focus-point. All description must move logically from one point to the next, and culminate in its focus. It must be held together by one or more dominant ideas. Thus, if our description were of an island, seen in sunlight from a ship, standing a little way out to sea, we might begin by stating *sunlight* as our theme. We should paint in a broad impression of the island, the sea sparkling in the sun and breaking in a crest of foam along the beach. Having reached shore, it would be confusing to

## On Description

mention the mountain peak on the horizon. We should lead the eye logically inland by means of a convenient stream, fringed by woods on one hand and meadows on the other, restating the sunlight theme till we reached the focus, the mountain peak. Then the description would come to a half-circle, stating how the hills sloped down to the marshy ground in the east, and would finish up by making clear the impression of sunlight, serenity, and open sky.

Description is so largely a business of order. It is comparatively simple to describe a small object or the interior of a room. But if we were asked to describe a station—or if a plan of an imaginary battle were drawn, and we were asked to narrate the course of the engagement, it is essential that our description should be a logical sequence. To follow the manner of the older novelists—"meanwhile we turn to the conclusion of the adventure of Roderick," or "Before we proceed any farther in our history, it may be proper to look a little back"—and to jump from the right wing of the battlefield to the left, is to plunge the reader into hopeless topographical confusion. There is, of course, another side to this. If the battle we are describing is something on so vast a scale as Austerlitz or Borodino the most effective method is that of Tolstoy. Tolstoy gives the sense of *confusion* in battle by showing the scene from several different points of view. His whole object is to confuse the reader—to make him share in the turmoil and uncertainty—and he can only do this by deliberately avoiding any attempt at a logical sequence.

But the effect should be gained by the selection of a unique or unexpected series of detail, not by the accumulation of detail that is unimportant or irrelevant. Unless there is something as remarkable about it as Sir Willoughby



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Patterne's, it is usually unnecessary to explain that the person whom you are describing has a leg. One line—"by a tideless, dolorous, midland sea"—is often more fully descriptive than twenty. Shakespeare's stage directions in the text of his plays are more purely and effectively descriptive than the most elaborate pieces of modern scenery.

The difference between a bald statement and an artistic description is the difference between statement and rendering "I saw Mr. Jenkins walk along the platform," is a barren statement; there is no attempt made to present Mr. Jenkins to the imagination of the reader. "Suddenly a figure detached itself from the crowd round the porter, a hunched, black-coated figure, beaming through goblin glasses" That is an artistic rendering; it takes the reader to a particular viewpoint and shows him this and that, in order to give him a vivid impression of the statement. "Mr Jenkins walked along the platform" In one word, it is the essential difference between the style of the folk story and that of the latest novel. The less imagination the reader possesses, the more fully must events and actions be rendered for him, the less readily is he able to elaborate a mere statement. Few people wholly appreciate Defoe. An inartistic rendering comes between the reader and the event described; blurs the effect rather than clarifies it. Below is an artistic rendering of the atmosphere of a room.

A cool green light fell through the windows which looked northward into an avenue of great limes, murmurous and odorous in summer noon-days, and our grandmother would gather us to this end of the room, the coolest retreat in the house, in the heat of the long, brilliant day. The space in the bow window was raised like a dais above the level of the room, there was a green velvet window-seat, and a huge old Chinese jar, standing on the

## On Description

floor, holding the relics of ancestral lavender and rose-leaves. There on the window-seat our grandmother drew us round her and read to us, sweetly and playfully, ancient moral anecdotes, stories out of tiny little volumes that she cherished—or Bible stories if it were Sunday. She read with a charming, trilling loveliness, dropping into soft, mysterious undertones, breaking out again with silver merriment—she had her own way in everything she did.

She loved the green window-seat and the rustling shadow of the limes.

Here is shown that queer power of Lubbock's—the ability to create not only the picture of the room, but its colour and fragrance, and the small noises that make its atmosphere—the power of animating all his scenes with forgotten presences, welding the person with his surroundings till they become inseparable. To much of his prose belongs the magic of retrospection—"et dulces moriens reminiscitur Argos."

The method is not the same as Huysmans. Lubbock does not wish us to retain an exact mental picture of the room: it is not the room which matters but its atmosphere, and that he gains by directing our attention to the cool shadow of the limes, the green velvet seat, the voice of his grandmother reading old stories—a selection of significant detail. Arnold Bennett wishes to give the reader an exact and precise description of the kitchen at Baines's shop. Descriptions may either be exhaustive and analytical, or impressionistic. They may secure their effect by a few vivid strokes, or by such a judicious selection and accumulation of important detail as the following:

Forget-me-nots on a brown field ornamented the walls of the

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

kitchen Its ceiling was irregular and grimy, and a beam ran across it, in this beam were two hooks, from these hooks had depended the ropes of a swing, much used by Constance and Sophia in the old days before they were grown up A large range stood out from the wall between the stairs and the window. The rest of the furniture comprised a table—against the wall opposite the range—a cupboard, and two Windsor chairs Opposite the foot of the steps was a doorway, without a door, leading to two larders, dimmer even than the kitchen, vague retreats, made visible by whitewash, where bowls of milk, dishes of cold bones, and remainders of fruit pies reposed on stillages, in the corner nearest the kitchen was a great steen in which the bread was kept Another doorway on the other side of the kitchen led to the first coal-cellar, where was also the slopstone and tap, and thence a tunnel took you to the second coal-cellar where coke and ashes were stored, the tunnel proceeded to a distant, infinitesimal yard, and from the yard by ways behind Mr Critchlow's shop you could finally emerge astonished upon Brougham Street <sup>1</sup>

This is the method of Wells, Dickens, Scott, sometimes of Conrad—this piling up, in perfectly logical order, of a host of significant details. The writer convinces by the mere amount he knows about the kitchen, just as Dickens creates so convincing a picture of Mr Squeers by the mere accumulation of detail. Minutely described portraits may result in confusion, the piling up of detail may defeat its own ends—but the details here are very carefully chosen It depends entirely on the point of view, on the refraction of the picture through the author's mind Beauty is purely relative. Gissing saw beauty in slums, and the theme of any of Mary Webb's novels could be stated in a single brutal sentence By this accumulative method Aldous Huxley (in *Half Holiday*) describes a man's boots, and spends as much care in their

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, chapter 111

## On Description

description as a novelist of the older school might have spent over a sunset.

Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, is an impressionist. Her colours are deep and cool and dazzling, like the colours of stained glass or some pictures of Jacopo Bassano. Moving through the reader's mind, a crowd of diverse and static detail keeps pace with the characters. By how subtle a collocation of contrasts does she paint twilight

There was an old woman gossiping in the kitchen and the blinds were sucked in and out by the breeze all was blowing, all was growing and over all those plates and bowls and tall brandishing red and yellow flowers a very thin yellow veil would be drawn like a vine-leaf at night. But the leaf like veil was so fine that lights lifted it, voices crinkled it he could see through it a figure stooping, hear coming close, going away some dress rustling, some chain tinkling—*To the Lighthouse*.

Her most perfect piece of Impressionism is that exquisite picture of the crab

Outside the rain poured down more directly and powerfully as the wind fell in the early hours of the morning. The aster was beaten to the earth. The child's bucket was half full of rainwater and the opal-shelled crab slowly circled round the bottom, trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep sides trying again and falling back, and trying again and again.—*Jacob's Room*.

This is magnificently irrelevant. Her method is to describe storm, loneliness, desolation indirectly, by concentrating on apparently disconnected details—on the skull of a sheep or a boy's pail. Thus we might give a vivid impression of a cold day by describing in detail a red-nosed cabby rubbing his hands, or a workman shivering over a charcoal brazier. Sometimes this method succeeds in giving an atmosphere, containing no detail in leaving a general impression.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

In the twilit dining-room one's body was like a hot throbbing in cool dark air, ringed by cool walls holding dark in far corners, coolness poured out through the wide-open wind toward the rain-cool grey façades of the opposite houses, cool cool until the throbbing ceased.—DOROTHY RICHARDSON, *Inte*

Here the effect is gained by the constant reiteration of word "cool," aided by words like "dark," "twilit," "ra  
"grey."

It is more effective when it is done by the method of concise selection. The following passage is brutal in impression of noise and destruction. Its sense is echoed in the brief sentences, the monosyllabic words.

The distance was thudding heavily. The horizon was lost perhaps, and was bumping over the earth. Ahead of us, almost lost in a clump of trees, were the red roofs of secretive buildings. There were ragged gaps in the tiles. As we neared the farm there was a crash as though a boiler plate had fallen from great height to the paving stones, and was at once still. Columns of black smoke which had not been there before stood over the farm.—H. M. TOMLINSON, *All Our Yesterdays*, Part I.

The landscape is reduced to its essentials, the thunder guns, the roofs of the houses, the smoke of sudden explosions. The impression is gained by the constant restatement of the idea in varying form. The passage below is a description of *Winter* by means of the three themes of wind, darkness, and water. It opens with the wind, describes the darkness, describes the sea, referring again to the wind and darkness, and closes with a splendid pictorial restatement of the winter.

But on the way home they laughed and ran races, for the wind was getting up, blowing in moist from the sea, and it buffeted them like a friendly dog that wants to play. The moon darkened about them, behind them the trees of the Dair

## On Description

Churchyard were rising and falling and roaring like a sombre, steadfast wave layers of thin grey cloud were hurrying over the sky, covering it from East to West, weaving a swift-coming darkness. The long, taciturn Autumn that had endured into the last week of November was suddenly at an end, and now, as though through a breach in the sea-wall, in the space of a couple of hours, the winter had come flooding in over the marsh. With every gust of wind, with every increment of darkness, a nameless ecstasy and excitement seemed to be rising up all round. Even the water in the drains and land-locked pools, which ever since she had been in the marsh Sukey had seen mutely and sullenly swelling and diminishing, was now come to life, was moving against the bank with curt, slapping sounds, and ruffling up its surface against the wind.

A wisp of straw blew past them like a witch on a broomstick, and the crouched thorns clapped their skeleton hands.—S. T. WARNER, *The True Heart*.

Such impressionistic descriptions are closely allied to the prose poetry of De Quincey or De la Mare.

They wore that air of lovely timelessness which decks the thorn, and haunts for the half woken sense the odour of sweet briar: yet they were grey with the everlasting, as are the beards of the patriarchs or the cindery craters of the moon. Theirs was the semblance of having been lost, forgotten, abandoned, like some foundered, Nereid haunted derelict of the first sailors, rotting in dream upon an undiscovered shore. They hunched their vase shapes out of the green beneath the sunless blue of space, and for untrodden leagues around them stretched like a paradisaal savannah what we poor, thronging, clock vexed men call Silence. Solitude.—W. DE LA MARE, *The Vats*

This is allied to poetry not only in its rhythm, but in its crowded colour, its illustration, its reference to things remote from the scene. There is no attempt to give a precise description of the vats, to convey anything more than an atmosphere,

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

an imaginative idea. But such description, creating primarily an emotion, and only secondarily a picture of the scene, is dangerous and difficult to handle. The paragraph on dawn, quoted in the previous chapter, is poetic prose, creating a state of mind rather than an exact picture. Where Chesterton and Stevenson write poetical interpretations, Kipling writes a description of Nature.

The icy blackness of the Great North Road banded itself with smoking mists that changed from solid pearl to writhing opal, as they lifted above hedgerow level. The dew-wet leaves of the upper branches turned suddenly into diamond facets, and that wind which runs before the actual upheaval of the sun, swept out of the fragrant lands of the east and touched my cheek —  
KIPLING, *Debits and Credits*.

This is on a more pedestrian level than Chesterton's description<sup>1</sup>: a record of things seen, noted down; below is a record of things emotionally observed and interpreted:

Out of the East it welled and whitened the darkness trembled into light, and the stars were extinguished like the street lamps of a human city. The whiteness brightened into silver the silver warmed into gold the gold kindled into pure and living fire and the face of the East was barred with elemental scarlet. The day drew its first long breath, steady and chill, and for leagues around the woods sighed and shivered.—STEVENSON, *Prince Otto*

The energy, the splendour of colour are characteristic of Stevenson, but his is not a static picture. It is not impressionistic in the sense that it fixes a single instant of time: it is not impressionism of the type that follows—where a single picture is fixed on the mind, vivid with contrasted colour.

All the colours were so bright that they were grotesque and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Appendix I, p. 269

## On Description

startling. Above the violently green fields the sky shone like blue glass, and across the east were two long vermillion clouds. Behind the black hill the sun had shouldered up, molten, and the shadow of Vessons, standing monkey-like on the lowest bar of the gate, lay on a stretch of wet clover behind him—a purple, elfin creature, gifted with a prehensile dignity—MARY WEBB, *Gone to Earth*.

Such writing as this, unless done with restraint and sincerity, leads by slow and inevitable gradations to "Shiny Prose"—best exemplified by the worst passages in the prose of Oscar Wilde. This is on the borderland, virtuoso stuff

Outside, the tree-tops shook tremulous black lace across the silver deeps of the sky and jugged with ebony boughs upon the circle of the moon. Clear as bells sounded the slow breakers on Trewinnard beach and in the tall room a white moth circled round the candle flame interminably. A rat squeaked in the wall.—COMPTON MACKENZIE, *Carnival*.

And this is definitely below it—an obvious effort to strain language past bearing, with its empty epithets, its modifiers, its trite comparisons.

Scenery that was surely as beautiful as any fabled fairyland. Crown upon crown of deep purple hills stretched softly away into the evening distance of a golden sky as clear as amber—glorious trees nodding drowsily under a weight of clustering scarlet berries—tufts and hillocks of heather almost blazing like fire in the afterglow of the set sun—and a sweet mysterious noise of rippling water everywhere—the noise of falling "burnles" leaping from rocky heights, and trickling down into deep recesses of coolness and shadow fringed with bracken and fern. And then the first glimpse of Loch Katrine! That exquisite turn of the road which charms the dullest spectator —MARIE CORELLI  
*Boy*

She begins with an empty statement, vaguely embracing the whole atmosphere. In the second sentence she plunges



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

deeper into coloured generalities, into "crown upon crown of deep purple hills" The reader, lost in the evening sky, is jerked violently and illogically back to regard in rapid succession a number of nebulous trees ("Glorious trees"), tufts "*almost* blazing," and a mysterious and quite unlocated noise of streams rippling everywhere Even the most intelligent spectator is a trifle bewildered by these hammering superlatives, and confused by so intoxicating an abundance of colour. Such a passage shows the depths to which lack of sincerity, restraint, clear thinking and picturing, and the desire to do "justice" to a theme can bring a writer. It is as well to realize that no theme can have justice done to it fully, and that the only thing an author can do is to stimulate his reader's imagination, to try to satiate it is to invoke Nemesis.

## V

### ON HUMOUR

#### I WIT

Menacingly, insistently, I was adjured in my remote boyhood to shun Humour. It was called "trying to be funny," and regarded as only a little better than slang. It is true that, under the age of eighteen, the only humour that can be achieved is unconscious humour, but then it is equally true that the only poetry which can be achieved is bad poetry. Yet there is no harm in trying, and to imagine that Dickens was instinctively and effortlessly funny as soon as he put pen to paper is as absurd as to imagine that *Adonais* was written without corrections. Trying to be funny is an experiment, and all experiments are dangerous, but even the most austere and dignified of essays is equally dangerous and equally experimental. The mood, however, must come before the theme. I feel that this is true in spite of the old stories of the tragedy behind the clown's mask, and the *Stroller's Tale* in *Pickwick*. A man must feel like a tragedy before he writes one; he must feel amused before he creates a farce. Good jokes are sometimes born of despair, but humour in literature is born only from itself. Like any other art, the art of being funny cannot be attempted unless the author is in the mood. And of course—again like any other art—all that can be taught is negative, and merely being helped across crevasses will not make a man any the better mountaineer.

Humour seems to me to be present in three genera, in Wit, in Buffoonery, and in Nonsense.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Wit is an undefinable quality, discoverable in remarks, in music, in situations, in sculpture, in painting. It is so elusive that even Laurence Sterne cannot catch its fleeting essence. "Ideas, with the very words fitted to them *ready cut and dried*, come bounce all complete together into the brain, without the least manner of reflection. . . . Thus, you see that wit is only a *double entendre*"<sup>1</sup> In true humour there is always an element of broadness, even of coarseness. In every humorous figure there is something rich and oily, but the quality of wit is essentially delicate, evanescent, so that it can be present in a mere phrase. In literature wit is largely a matter of verbal humour. Jane Austen is a witty writer: but Mr. Collins is a great humorous creation. All Jane Austen's books are steeped in the gentle irony of wit. She stands outside her characters, smiling down at them, though sometimes the smile is a trifle acid (Indeed, there is an element of cruelty in all wit, which is absent in humour.) Only, I think, in the person of Anne Elliott does she come near to identifying herself in sympathy with one of her characters. The greasy, polite, contemptible Eltons, the interminable babble of Miss Bates, surging like a spent wave over everyone in the book—these are witty creations. Her characters are never types, and never wholly humorous, for Jane Austen could not be tempted to exaggerate, even in such a novel as *Northanger Abbey*. Fanny Burney's *Evelina* is a book that, deriving from Richardson and Smollett, has traces both of wit and humour. When Mrs. Selwyn remarks, "Certainly . . . there must have been some mistake in the birth of that young man, he was undoubtedly designed for the last age, for he is really polite," she is uttering a

<sup>1</sup> Sterne, *The Koran*, chapter viii.

## On Humour

remark that contains something of the ironical wit of Peacock. But Madame Duval belongs to the realm of pure humour

'What s the matter? What s the matter?' said the Captain.  
'Why, nothing—nothing s the matter O mon Dieu!'<sup>1</sup>

Fantasy belongs to the realm of wit rather than humour. It is when it rises into nonsense that it becomes humour. Max Beerbohm's *Zulaka Dobson* is one of the wittiest books in modern literature, as *Alice in Wonderland* is one of the most humorous.

Apart from the very delicate and difficult question of atmosphere and style, wit is a matter of words, of verbal felicity. The subtle irony of Peacock delights by that magical choice of phrase which can create such sentences as the following

Let me address them. I never failed to convince an audience that the best thing they could do was to go away.<sup>2</sup>

A spot which seemed adapted by nature to be the retreat of monastic mortification, being on the banks of a fine trout stream.<sup>3</sup>

"My warfare," said the friar, "is not of this world. I am militant not against man but the devil, who goes about seeking what he may devour."

"Oh! does he so?" said the baron, "then, I take it, that makes you look for him so often in my buttery."<sup>4</sup>

When wit depends only on the mere juggling with words it is a thing which changes, which has its fashions. No one could read now with any pleasure the tale of *Euphues*, wittiest of Elizabethan novels. I doubt whether the epigrams

Fanny Burney, *Evelina*, Letter XXXIII

<sup>1</sup> *Crochet Castle*, chapter xviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Maid Marian*, chapter I.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter iii.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

of Chesterton will be very much more intelligible in five hundred years. Half a century ago the most popular form of wit was the pun and it is dreary work reading through the *jeux d'esprits* of the 'seventies. It is a significant commentary on the fashions of wit that *Eugene Aram* should have outlived *Tim Turpin* and *Ben Battle*. The epigram, the paradox, the pun are "playing with words and idle similes"; and it is very easy to make a cheap epigram or a bad pun. They are not so common now—"How wonderfully," says Ruskin, "since Shakespeare's time have we lost the power of laughing at bad jests!" But if it is easy to do, it is also excellent training in the handling of words. For the essential rule of wit is, of course, brevity, conciseness. Any truth simply and concisely stated becomes an epigram, until it is old enough to be called a platitude. That is the fate of all dead witticisms, the grave of all proverbs. And yet "a rolling stone gathers no moss" is not only profoundly true, but profoundly witty.

### 2 EXCURSUS ON THE MALAPROPISM

The Malapropism seems to me to stand on the brink between the witty and the humorous. It is a mistake, but it is a grand mistake. It is the mistake of the man who aims higher than his arrow can fly. And most of the great malapropists are also great humorous characters. It is with the prince and paragon of all yokels that Malapropism steps into English Literature. It is, of course, Harry Bailly, landlord of the Tabard Inn and stage manager of the Canterbury Pilgrimage. Harry Bailly is not a genuine malapropist—perhaps he is too "wys and well y-taught" for that. His one true malapropism is an oath, and it seems queer that a man who must have been so used to plumbing the rich, scarlet

## 1 *On Humour*

depths of blasphemy should have been uncertain about a swearword. On the second occasion I suspect he is deliberately ridiculing the pedantry of the Doctor by mispronouncing his favourite gods. The Doctor had been droning out the maxims of Hippocrates and Galen. To Harry Bailly the words called up an image of his local bar, and foaming tankards filled with gallons of "moyste and corny ale, and flavoured with rare hippocras

I pray to God so save thy gentil corse,  
And eke thy urinals and thy jourdains,  
Thyn Ypocras and eke thy gallons.

Harry Bailly seems to me to be the first great comic character in English. He is painted in those deep rich colours which are the ingredients of all those mighty taverners, from Falstaff, or from his jolly descendant Mine Host of the Garter, to Seithenyn or Mr Jorrocks. The Pardoner, the Summoner, the fat Wife of Bath—these are all variations on a theme. But the theme is Harry Bailly. He is the essence of all the bravery and buffoonery of the Middle Ages, all their love of large jokes and long stories, a focus of the "merry jests" of a hundred years.

It is not surprising that after Harry Bailly there should be a silence. Silence is the most genuine applause and all the world raised its mediaeval hat to the Landlord of the Tabard Inn, till Sir John Falstaff dug it suddenly and catastrophically in the ribs.

It is fitting that Shakespeare should take up the theme where Chaucer left it. It is fitting, too, that the first Mrs. Malaprop should be a landlady as the first Mr Malaprop was a landlord. Mrs. Quickly exemplifies another quality of the Malapropism—its endearing childishness. But with

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

the *Merry Wives* the gift has gone to the nobility. It smacks still faintly of the soil, but Mrs Quickly has handed over her patent to Sir Hugh Evans. And Sir Hugh is an unpleasantly pedantic fool, fit companion for the self-satisfied old lecher who stuffed a pillow inside his waistcoat and struggled into the greasy trousers of a better man than he. Sir Hugh Evans is a satiric caricature, and belongs to the realms of crude humour. The wit of Shakespeare is tedious; his humour is as fresh as the tragic passion of Othello. Dogberry is a much clearer ancestor of Mrs Malaprop, indeed, that great lady has taken over one of his remarks: "Comparisons are odorous," said the master of the Watch . . .

He is the flower of all policemen. He is what all policemen are expected to be, he sums up the *idea* of the policeman. In more senses than one, he is a special constable. At the end of the play one loves this old, incompetent policeman for showing up Don Pedro, as one loves Emilia for betraying Iago. He has a true sense of the dignity of his office, and preserves it in a halo of unintelligible words: "Palabras, neighbour Verges, palabras!"

I have said that Malapropism went from the yeoman to the knight. In its earliest and purest stage it is an abortive attempt to imitate the language of a feudal superior. But a new influence altered its course in Elizabethan drama. That influence was the "fantastical knight" Don Armado, of *Love's Labour's Lost*. He is not an untaught churl, trying to keep pace with the -ions and -isms of Holofernes. He is a man maddened by the rich wine of words. The foam of an intoxicated vocabulary splutters from his lips. He lives in a whirl of phrases, wallowing in speech like a pig in a mud bath. It was Don Armado who set the fashion, and it was Eumuloe who took it up. He is a more unassuming

## On Humour

copy, without the moustache and the feathered hat, and the monstrous great strouting pair of slops, without any of Armado's dignity of appearance, for he has to stuff his attenuated calves with lath and plaster. The *Pleasant Comedie of Patient Grissel* needs all the virtue of that admirable maiden to suffer a single reading. Eumuloe is the one really refreshing character in the play. He fights an entertaining duel with Sir Owen, which results unhappily in a "vulneration imprisionate to the manual organ. (Malapropism is the Nemesis of Johnsonese.) I thought, by the Syntheresis of my soul, egad! I had not been imperished till the blood, showing his red tincture at the top of a fair enveloped glove, sunk along my arm and spoilt my waist coat."

I suppose this particular delight in mere sound, in mere extravagance of vocabulary, will never happen again till the language suffers another renaissance. All through the works of Shakespeare and Nashe and their contemporaries runs this childish and magnificent lust for out Heroding Herod the love for bombast and high phrases that lingers almost as a kind of archaism in Surtees and Dickens and has since gone with other noble follies, frowned on by sober middle age. Of all the moderns, Edward Lear is closest to the wildest of the Elizabethans, with his passion for

Words, but words!

Born like the bubbles of a spring that come  
Of zest for springing.

Malapropism is only an incident in the character of Sancho Panza, as it is in the character of Sarah Gamp. But it makes Mrs. Slipslop. Short, fat, red faced, with that one scarlet pimple glowing like a Bardolphian carbuncle on her nose,



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

the immortal princess of the scullery stands supreme. Malapropism has returned to the earth which bore it. Mrs Slipslop reeks of the soil, "the dust and the sweat of the old Adam." The spectacle of this horrible old harridan leering up the stairs at Joseph, and asking if he would "drink a glass of something good this morning" is not seductive. But "if we like a man, the slightest hint sophisticates" The love-scene between Joseph and Mrs Slipslop is pure Dickens. She is like some frightful monster, rising flabbily amorous from the primaeval slime—laying her fat pink hand on his knee—and that despairing, gin-scented sigh: "Oh Joseph!"

She is a dreadful hag: one of those bent, hook-nosed crones one passes sometimes on the stairs. A murmured apology, a whisk of flannel petticoats, the slow splashing of slops. . . It conjures up a vision of dark, dripping corridors in some satanic lodging-house. But Mrs Slipslop lives still, and her progeny is spread over the slums of all the world. Down these long, secret passages, hung with cobwebs, she leads that crooked minuet. The swaying broom, the flutter of the triumphant mop, the sinister plash of the tin pail! The Dance of the Trulls swings by to that unearthly music. . . .

Smollett has none of the wit and a far less delicate humour than Fielding. He is essentially a great humorous writer. Winifred Jenkins has walked straight out of a rustic fairy-land, with her newly crimped hair and her brass necklace and her wonderful phonetics. She is in fit surroundings with that bitter old crab Tabitha and the eccentric Humphry. She should have been born, like Beatrice, under a dancing star, or to have appeared in some such romantic halo as did Humphry, when he scandalized poor Tabitha by an inade-

## On Humour

quate pair of trousers. "Mistress was taken with the asteriks, comments Winifred, Oh Mary! The whole family were in such a constupation!" She is delightfully full of conceit.

'You knows as how yaller fits my fizognomy God he knows what havick I shall make among the mailed sects when I make my first appearance in this killing collar!" She is proud even of her spelling, which is rather worse than Tabitha Bramble's. O woman, woman! If thou hadst the least consumption of what pleasure we scullers have when we can cumster the crabbidst buck offhand, and spell the ethnick vords, without lucking at the Primmer!

But she made a fit companion for Humphry, and no one could hope for a more romantic wooing. I suppose they are travelling still, "up North," as Lydia said. Humphry cracks his whip and gathers up the reins, and the coach creaks and rattles into the sunset on the long white road to Bath.

The whole body of these scattered and diversified tendencies blossomed suddenly in the rich, romantic flower of Mrs. Malaprop. With a swish and a heave of her Oriental skirts, she bestrides the whole horizon. Harry Bailly, Dog berry, even Mrs. Slipslop are drowned under that "oracular tongue," beneath the nice derangement of those epitaphs. She is a purely poetic creation. She has visions of strange creatures beyond the ken of man the golden pineapple of *politeness* the *grey and loathsome petrifications* that strew the plains of Derbyshire, that sublime dream, summed up in the words "odorous caparisons"—a breath of strange scent, the whim of unearthly steeds. Under the influence of that luxuriant mind, the commonest things take on a sinister and significant meaning. The great lady of laughter sits like the gods, at home in unfamiliar worlds. She has taken the nameless orphan and christened it with an unfor-

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

gettable title At last a great comic character has been created by verbal wit carried to the sublime.

### 3. CRUDE HUMOUR

It is, of course, impossible to make distinctions or to make divisions I think wit must always contain some elements of satire All Peacock's characters are witty, except Seritheny, who is on too magnificent a scale Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* is the wittiest play of the nineteenth century The lambent humour of Lucas and Charles Lamb, which plays on the surface, taking nothing very seriously, is the spark of wit. It gleams at intervals in the pages of *Punch*.

What I shall call Crude Humour is no real or separate division of humour, any more than bad art is a separate division of art Crude humour is simply something done badly. It is the expression of the popular love of distortion and exaggeration, which has given us the artificial lovers, crooks, and clowns of the stage To exaggerate verbal wit is to create buffoonery, to render humour crude Of the Malapropists, with whom I have dealt at such inordinate length, Sir Hugh Evans, Don Armado, Eumuloe, and perhaps Mrs Slipslop seem to me to belong to the regions of buffoonery Their humour is the humour of verbal exaggeration. Buffoonery in words is always crude humour. Buffoonery is the humour of situation. true humour is the humour of character. The verbal humour of Mr Polly is buffoonery, but then Mr Polly is a great humorous character, quite apart from the humour of his speech. He only follows the rule in all humour—that there must always be present a slight touch of exaggeration or grotesquerie Humour is life slightly enlarged and distorted.

## On Humour

It will therefore be understood that the following pages indicate pitfalls rather than solecisms. It is in the way in which the methods are handled, not in the methods themselves, that danger lies.

### 4. EXAGGERATION

The first element of crude humour is the element of mere exaggeration or caricature. The earliest example is in the *Greek Anthology*

Little Hermogenes, when he drops anything on the ground, has to drag it down to him with a hook at the end of a pole.

This indicates the danger of exaggeration. It becomes mere facetiousness, and facetiousness is a literary and a social crime. Done well, the Exaggerated or the Grotesque is effective, as it is effective in Vaudeville's interview with the Indian, or Sarah Gamp's vigil over Martin. Done badly, it rings false—it becomes absurd without being magnificently absurd. The original forty pages of *Munchausen* are sublimely ridiculous, but the remainder are ridiculous while signally failing to be sublime. *A Tramp Abroad* is full of such contrasts, and perhaps the most obvious in Shakespeare is the Falstaff of *Henry the Fourth* compared with the Falstaff of the *Merry Wives*. In *Henry the Fourth* there is clownery enough, but there is something more than mere clownery. Clownery alone, unaided by the pure humour of character, can reduce a man to the butt of Mrs. Ford. In its obvious form this inartistic humour of exaggeration is seen on the cinema. There is no doubt that the misfortunes of other people are often funny to the onlooker. The descent of a pail of whitewash on a man's head is eternally and undeniably comic. There it is. A fact. Undeniable. But pails of white-

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

wash are crude. It is only truth to character which can raise the humour of situation into pure comedy.

Verbal exaggeration is a part of the exaggeration of incident. I have spoken of the Johnsonian word before. Deliberately used, it results in facetiousness. A man who calls his tailor a "sartorial expert" will wait long for a smile. It is the crudest and most frequently abused of all forms of humour. The person who originally coined the phrase "terminological inexactitude" created a mild witticism, it has since become the last abomination of the facetious. Dickens, of course, made erroneous and not always successful use of this form of verbal humour.

With this, Mr Stiggins, entertaining a praiseworthy desire to promote the sobriety of the meeting, and to exclude therefrom all improper characters, hit Brother Tadger on the summit of the nose. His [Sam's] heroic parent attacked the Reverend Mr Stiggins with manual dexterity<sup>1</sup>

To talk of "netting the spheroid" makes a football reporter neither lucid, dignified, nor amusing. It is merely facetious. A deplorable lesson in the art of misusing words is supplied by American cinema captions, where the unhappy author is compelled to make ceaseless efforts to be amusing. Therein, I think, lies the difference between such characters as Tony Weller and Mr. Jorrocks. Jorrocks belongs distinctly to Crude Humour. He is a lay figure, uttering set phrases each time he appears. Both use the humour of verbal exaggeration, but Tony Weller is a living man, and his speech is only an incident in his character. Unless Jorrocks dashed his vig, he would be unrecognizable. It is where the Malapropists are amusing only on account of their malapropisms that they cease to be great humorous figures.

<sup>1</sup> *Pickwick Papers*

## On Humour

### 5 ANTICLIMAX

Another element in crude humour is the essence of Malapropism. I mean the Anticlimax, what Pope called Bathos. The Malapropist attempts to show himself grander than he is and the result is the ludicrous. But Bathos is the world's vengeance on pomposity. Matthew Arnold the Sage dies of heart failure while running to catch a Liverpool bus. Tennyson the Anointed Prophet climbs a ladder to examine the constellation of Orion and falls head over heels to ground. It is not that there is anything essentially comic in a man dying while running for a bus, or even in a man falling down a ladder—unless that man happens to have acquired the unnatural dignity that for so long surrounded the names of Arnold and Tennyson.

Bathos creeps most frequently, of course, into the more serious works, wherever the high level is for an instant relaxed—into the austere and dignified stanzas of *In Memoriam*

And, even when she turn'd the curse  
Had fallen, and her future Lord  
Was drown'd in passing thro' the ford  
Or kill'd in falling from his horse

or in so solemn and Miltonic a poem as Dyer's *Runs of Rome*, where he speaks of "Palladius, Angelus, or British Jones." Inigo lends a little dignity to the surname but Jones cannot stand for long beside the great heroes of antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The device of Bathos, used deliberately, is commonest in the mock heroic poem, as when Villiers parodies the hesitation of Palladius in the *Virgin Widow*

Cf Pope, *Martin Scriblerus*, 1727 chapter v et seq

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

How has my passion made me *Cupid's* scoff!  
This hasty Boot is on, the other off,  
And sullen lyes, with amorous design  
To quit loud fame, and make that Beauty mine

*The Rehearsal*, 111 2.

Bathos is the common element in all skits, it is the chief charm of Shenstone's *Schoolmistress*:

And all in sight doth rise a birchen tree,  
Which Learning near her little dome did stowe,  
Whilom a twig of small regard to see,  
Though now so wide its waving branches flow,  
And work the simple vassals mickel woe,  
For not a wind might curl the leaves that blew  
But their limbs shuddered, and their pulse beat low,  
And as they looked they found their horror grew,  
And shaped it into rods, and tangled at the view!

The Malapropism is an attempt at the sublime which only achieves the ridiculous, anticlimax deliberately aims at a contrast between the small and the heroic. And contrast is a device as successful in comedy as in tragedy. The juxtaposition of the commonplace and the magnificent can be tragic as in the Porter's scene in *Macbeth*, or comic as in the sleepless foil that Cervantes set to ride beside Don Quixote. Bathos is that device of contrast carried to excess, exaggerated into an anticlimax. An example of this occurs in *Rasselas*. A certain artist, named Imlac, had made a flying ship, and Rasselas determined to use it as a means of escape from the Happy Valley. The artist expatiated on the merits of his machine. "Sir," said he, "you have seen but a small part of what the mechanic sciences can perform. I have been long of opinion that, instead of the tardy conveyance of ships and chariots, man might use the swifter migration of

## On Humour

wings, that the fields of the air are open to knowledge, and that only ignorance and idleness need crawl upon the ground." He then points out the advantages of his method of escape over any other, the pleasure given to a philosopher of being able to observe the world spread out like a map before him, and induces the prince to believe that he will be able to "tower into the air beyond the malice and pursuit of man."

The artist was every day more certain that he should leave vultures and eagles behind him, and the contagion of his confidence seized upon the prince. In a year the wings were finished and on a morning appointed the maker appeared, furnished for flight, on a little promontory he waved his pinions awhile to gather air, then leaped from his stand, and in an instant dropped into the lake.

Calverley was a master of the art of sinking." But even deliberately and cleverly done, Bathos is only a trick—it is a part of the essential ingredient of laughter, unexpectedness, and it is usually rather obviously unexpected. Laughter is born, says Sir Thomas Browne, of "new, unusual, or unexpected jucundities," and sometimes these jucundities are unexpected by the author. Milton himself falls once or twice "dismounted on th' Aleian plain" and unintentional humour is fatal even to the greatest poetry—the strongest line must come at the end. For Bathos is anticlimax in little. The preposterous end of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is an anticlimax. But this is bathos

Raised of grassy turf

    Their table was, and mossy seats had round,  
    And on her ample square, from side to side,  
    All Autumn piled though Spring and Autumn here  
    Danced hand in hand. Awhile discourse they hold—  
    No fear lest dinner cool.



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

With the violence of a switchback those five words transport the reader from the garden of lost Eden to the stuffy, Sunday afternoon interior of a suburban dining-room. Henceforth the ambrosia is faintly redolent of boiled mutton.

### 6 QUOTATION

It is dangerous to quote or to parody a quotation. Used facetiously, it is allied to the pun, an outworn form of wit, what Milton would call "Abominable, inutterable, and worse." A man who remarks, à propos of the naming of a dog, "Toby or not Toby, that is the question," a tennis player who says something about those also serving who only stand and wait, a bar-tender who removes a fly from the foam, with the words, "Thou shalt not float upon thy watery beer"—these cause in the listener a shudder of uncontrollable disgust. The authors of such verbal witticisms are making bad puns, quoting stale lines, and often merely misusing clichés. Every literary crime can find a justification, brilliantly and originally used, an adroitly adapted quotation can become the wittiest of parodies. But it is dangerous ground.

### 7 NEOLOGISMS

To such crude verbal humour belong also the use of slang, of archaisms, of neologisms. The American language offers sometimes highly successful, sometimes lamentable examples of such facetiousness. It is notorious for a verbal exaggeration which finds expression in similes, often grotesque and farcical enough to be amusing. But I fancy the most distressing spectacle in literature is the spectacle of Edgar Poe trying to be funny.

## On Humour

I am, that is to say, I was a great man, but I am neither the author of *Junius* nor the Man in the Iron Mask, for my name, I believe, is Robert Jones, and I was born somewhere in the city of Fum Fudge.

Thus begins a story called *Loonquig*. All his would be humorous tales are full of this childish form of facetiousness—the kind of facetiousness Arnold Bennett disapproved of in *Tono Bungay*, where a newspaper proprietor was called Lord Boom. It is bad because it is cheap, it is also very easily done, and no good work is done easily. Even Peacock sometimes makes efforts to be facetious with his Miss Toobad, Mr. Cranium, and the rest. I almost suspect it in his case to be a deliberate imitation of Ben Jonson's method in depicting humours—and *Nightmare Abbey* bears a quotation from *Everyman in his Humour* on the title-page. But then Peacock has created his own humour. His characters live in a different world. "Bring some Madeira!" says Scythrop to the palpitating Raven, after debating whether he should shoot himself, and when would be a propitious moment. It epitomizes all Peacock's novels. One hovers on the edge of gloomy and catastrophic precipices, and is continually rescued by a drunken party of debauchees, singing wonderful songs, and passing from hand to hand an inexhaustible flagon.

The use of archaisms (albeit, quoth, forsooth) is equally facile and foolish. "Phavorinus the Philosopher (as Gellius telleth the tale) did hit a young man over the Thumbe very handsomely, for using over old and over strange wordes."<sup>1</sup> Coining words is a habit that can lead to the best or the worst results. But the use of such devices is merely getting further away from the fundamental rule of

R. de Bury *Philobiblon*.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

simplicity. A great humorist, such as W. W. Jacobs, has no need to dress up his humour in inkhorn terms, to distort, or to exaggerate, and at his best Dickens is always simple, which is the reason why David's visit to Yarmouth is more genuinely humorous than the fête of Mrs. Leo Hunter.

### 8. NONSENSE

Crude humour is caricature, exaggeration on too slight a basis of reality. When this exaggeration is carried to sublime heights, and when the basis of reality scarcely exists at all, it becomes Nonsense, and Nonsense is a form of perfectly genuine humour. When trying to be amusing, children scarcely ever avoid becoming facetious. Youth lacks restraint. But only youth can really appreciate nonsense, for children keep still a broken fragment of dream, and it is not so long since they left worlds whose laws are not ours. Pious and middle-aged aunts and uncles they may become, and the word "nonsense" be continually on their lips. But their nonsense will no longer be the nonsense of childhood. To the middle-aged nonsense is no longer a virtue, unless they have kept beside them something of their own childhood.

Nonsense is that element of the grotesque or the exaggerated present in all forms of humour, carried to such an extent that it ceases to bear reference to life and gets into a new realm, the realm of the magnificently irrelevant. Nonsense is not merely caricature. Caricature has its head among incredible clouds, but its feet are somewhere planted on solid earth. Mr. Venus talks as no one ever could talk in this imperfect world—"Don't sauce *me* in the vicious pride of your youth. Don't hit *me* because you see I'm down. I'm low enough without that. It dropped into the till, I suppose. They drop into everything. There was two in

## On Humour

the coffee-pot at breakfast time, Molars." But Mr Venus also plotted at night with his sinister accomplice and when he was not talking such fantastic poetry he talked in a commonplace and even criminal way Nonsense moves among the clouds, in a dreamland of its own. Swift, Sterne, Rabelais wrote nonsense which was a satiric commentary on fact. But Lewis Carroll in prose, and Edward Lear in poetry, created a nonsense which is in itself an independent art. The writing of nonsense is easier for a child than the writing of serious prose or verse. It remains easy, till the world ceases to remain a fairyland.

### 9. TRUE HUMOUR

The best humour in each category is True Humour. Supremely great humour is like supremely great poetry. It defies analysis. It is a collocation of magically chosen words. It is an atmosphere, created. Heaven knows how. Ask me no more if East or West the Phoenix builds her spicy nest. The fantastic light of Comedy is as elusive and indescribable as the sole Arabian bird. Always it contains that element of exaggeration which all art must contain. That faint distortion, enlargement, focusing, which makes Gauguin exciting where Haydon and his like are merely dull, which makes *Karamazoff* a work of art, where a transcript from actual life would be either tedious or unconvincing. But the edifice, however tall, is built on truths that do not change. Fashions in humour alter, but great humour remains funny in spite of fashions. It is the crude, contemporary humour in Aristophanes that has perished. What lives is the work of an artist. Aristophanes is never consistently amusing. I am sometimes doubtful whether his fame as a humorist is not partly convention, partly a sort of awed

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

wonder that anyone who lived so long ago was able to be so modern. Few people are honest enough to admit the multiple imperfections of Shakespeare. In every work of art, however great, are elements only born to die. All the novels of Dickens are deserts scattered with magnificent oases. The theology of Milton perished with the age of Galileo, *Paradise Lost* lives by the Gathering of the Hosts of Hell, by Satan's Address to the Sun, by the Invocation to the Third Book. While a work is still modern, and so long as its humour is contemporary, it remains impossible to criticize it. Time and the turns of fashion will decree what parts are incorruptible and what are to be "lost in the uncomfortable night of nothing." The *Punches* that our great-grandfathers chuckled over at the breakfast-table amuse us now only by contrast, only as yesterday's dresses amuse us. Superficially it seems as if the fashion in humour changed, while the fashion in tragedy remains the same eternally. This is only a half-truth. Nothing has so profoundly altered during the last seventy years as the taste in tragedy. Any reader of Mrs. Inchbald or Clara Reeve can see that. The horrors of the *Castle of Otranto*, over which Gray used to shudder at midnight, would bore a child to-day. The tragedies of the mid-nineteenth century would not even succeed in doing that, and the comedy of *Lewis Arundel* or *Charles O'Malley* can raise but the ghost of the mirth they once inspired. There is no more damning commentary on the essential vulgarity of the Victorians than the writings of Douglas Jerrold, or the illustrations of Charles Keene. It is the insincere elements in tragedy and comedy that are ephemeral—the novel situations, the brilliantly forced dialogue, action so clever and unreal as the dramas of Oscar Wilde. Truth to human nature in whatever situation remains

## On Humour

true, remains profoundly tragic, like the jealousy of Othello, or the romantic weakness of Madame Bovary or profoundly humorous, like the conceit of Bottom, or the obstinate simplicity of Sancho. The elements that alter are the verbal witticisms, the exaggerations. Great humour includes verbal wit, crude comedy—but Falstaff, Dick Swiveller, the brothers Shandy, even El Samet, the garrulous barber of the *Arabian Nights*, have something else. They have unconscious as well as deliberate humour. They have the power of inspiring sympathy as well as laughter. They are, in fact, *characters*. And the humour of character is human nature gifted with a strange streak of poetry. Pecksniff is not a small, mean hypocrite: he is a hypocrite on the colossal scale. Seithenyn is not a mere drunkard: he drains cups whose grapes have been pressed in no mortal vintage. The only humour that dates is the humour of incident. *Three Men in a Boat* is clever, superficial buffoonery. *The Canterbury Tales* is profound humour of character. *Three Men in a Boat* is faded, because it is merely the humour of incident. But Chaucer's humour is the changeless, unstaling comedy of human nature. Once more this means truth to Nature. Once become untrue, insincere, and humour ceases to be genuine. It is the lesson of sincerity and simplicity that needs such endless learning.

## VI

### ON THE WRITING OF LETTERS

"I BEGIN to see the whole scheme of letter-writing," said Stevenson. "You sit down every day, and pour out an equable stream of twaddle "

And that, I think, is no bad definition of the art. A letter is apparently artless, it contains no climax carefully introduced, it lacks drama, it has ragged edges. "A divine chit-chat" deals with moods more than with adventures. The perfect letter-writer requires perfect intimacy and the conviction that the person to whom he writes is interested in every detail and change of mood. It is this delightful sense of intimacy that makes everyone who reads her letters fall in love with Dorothy Osborne. "This is a strange letter, sure, I have not had time to read it over, but I have said anything that came in my head to put you out of your dumps."<sup>1</sup>

The first essential of letter-writing is that it should be impromptu. "A letter," says Cowper, "may be written upon anything or nothing, just as that anything or nothing happens to occur. . . . A letter is written as a conversation is maintained or a journey performed." Unless it is written in the mood it will be a bad letter. An essay is a necessary thing which we are prepared to suffer; but to demand, on the spot, a letter as a piece of composition is only to ask for an epistle. For an elaborate letter destroys itself and its object. It remains unread. And if it isn't readable, it is not worth the writing.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Dorothy Osborne*, January 30, 1653

## *On the Writing of Letters*

Everybody over the age of five is a letter writer, only journalists and schoolboys are essayists. And yet the letter remains a fading art. Everyone knows the average letter. It consists of a series of thinly related statements of fact and the more important the fact happens to be, the more the correspondent feels he has written a letter "with something in it." The great letter writers knew the art of writing a good letter with nothing in it. Even after a hundred and fifty years the "leucocholy" of Gray is as wistful and appealing as when he wrote of it. Even after fifty years, strangers, with no knowledge of the intimacy of their correspondents, can take delight in the sympathy and humour of FitzGerald and the gay enthusiasms of Keats.

For a letter is like a personal diary—and a diary of mood more than of event—nearer to the style of Pepys or Barbellion than the dignified self-concealment of Gibbon. "All letters, methinks," says Dorothy Osborne again, "should be free and easy as one's discourse not studied as an oration, nor made up of hard words like a charm."<sup>1</sup> Most people's letters read like the diaries of schoolboys, with a less emphatic insistence perhaps on meals. A letter is a conversation on paper, with no one to interrupt. It is never an essay, a speech, a sermon, or a panegyric. Its object is to bring the writer before the reader's eye—to give a glimpse into the mind, a picture of mood and surrounding. And it is therefore essential to be yourself, and, with reservations, to write as you would talk—to follow Swift's advice as admirably as he followed it himself, to write "very good sense, civility, and friendship, *without any stiffness or constraint*."

People are interested in the smallest things and not in the most important. Lamb describes a meal, FitzGerald the

*Letters of Dorothy Osborne, October 2, 1653*



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

sensations of sitting in an arm-chair, Cowper the serenity of his summer-house, Keats an old lady in a sedan-chair ("a round-eyed skinny-lidded inanity"), and Horace Walpole the feeding of his goldfish, and how he rescued his parrot from drowning by "ferrying him out" with his hat. The random thoughts, the tiny actions are the things by which we can recognize our friends. Anyone, given the opportunity, could drown in a shipwreck, or rescue a man from a burning house but only Smith could scratch the back of his head with that characteristic gesture. The letters of Uncle Samuel to Jeremy<sup>1</sup> are models of their kind, for they describe those small things that a boy is interested in, not the large, vague ones at which his imagination can only guess. The true cause of the bad letter is a lack of imaginative effort. It is not an easy thing to describe the curate's tea-party more vividly than in a few colourless sentences: it needs an effort of the imagination, and something too of the training of the novelist. But the important thing to realize is that the number of buttons on Mrs. Conk's dress, the number of rooks on the elms, the number of muffins consumed by the curate are all quite as important as Mrs. Conk, the elms, and the curate themselves. The letter which lacks detail and lacks comment is impersonal, unsympathetic, and dull. The essential virtues of the letter-writer should be vivid observation, a sincere rendering of it, and a profound sense of sympathy or intimacy with his correspondent.

I am going to write a letter from on board a yacht to a friend. What I want to say is in my mind in a jumbled crowd of notes. Smallness of the boat, occasional storms, the skipper; the loneliness, yachting at Cowes. But this, I feel,

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Walpole, *Jeremy and Hamlet*, chapter xii, *Jeremy at Crale*, chapters viii, xii

## *On the Writing of Letters*

should be arranged in an appropriate order. The loneliness and the small size of the boat should be my climax. And my first draft is inclined to be

Sometimes the skipper seems a little anxious about the weather, and indeed we have had occasional storms. But I feel the sense of danger makes us immeasurably superior to the so-called yachtsmen of Cowes, who only play at sailing. Sometimes, however, I am appalled by the loneliness, and by the tiny size of our boat among the huge Atlantic waves.

So far, so bad. I have crowded all my goods into a corner of the shop window. I expand further, introducing detail, working up to my climax

Now and then I have observed our craggy, weather-beaten old skipper glancing anxiously at the sky. Indeed, at times the horizon has been banked with heavy clouds, and the great waves have threatened every instant to overwhelm our small cockle-shell. Yet even while we are flung on their crests like a cork, I have felt that, after all, we are better off than the tired people who play at yachting—going for a quiet sail when the sun shines and the sea is calm. Here we are one with Nature and the loneliness and majesty of the ocean show up the tremendous contrast.

And then we read this

Our 80-ton yacht was a cockle-shell. Beautifully made, taking each wave the easiest way, as if by judgment, like a tennis player. But she does groan and creak at nights with the effort, and every now and then a wave she has misjudged gives her a great thundering bang; and she stands still and shivers like a horse. It's a very small world, a yacht, and you are dependent on it, for the Atlantic makes you feel how foolish and suburban it is to say that you can't swim. If the yacht can't live, you can't.

I kind of like it—the only uncomfortable thing was to see the skipper as we saw him once or twice, obviously uneasy. But this was never in the open sea—always fog, or invisible lights, or entrances to harbours. When we rode out the gale, he was so

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

pleased with the boat, ducking, and lifting, and making little runs, and going at the sea now on the outside edge and now on the inside that he went below and smoked a pipe. He could hear what was happening. So I came up about 10 at night, because I had been tumbled out of my bunk, and I found no one on deck, and the tiller tied up a little to one side, and I knew it was all right. But I never saw such a vicious wilderness as that sea, towering and racing to the wind's screams. It must have taken more pluck to sail the first ship than it did to fly the first aeroplane. You can't come down when you like or when it's past a joke.

We saw a sun-fish. Likewise a whale! And 16,000 gannets, the size of geese, sitting carefully in tiers on a tilted inaccessible island of rock. There were no other ships—a dead lonesome sea. The most beautiful coast I have ever seen. The so-called yachtsmen of Cowes, it seems, have champagne lunches in the Solent, and then spread canvas and take a two-hours' run when the breeze is fair and light. They meet the same people at Cowes as they meet later at the grouse, and this life, which they made to resemble Heaven, must be the live facsimile of Hell. Different clothes, and the same well-fed, carefully exercised bodies, and the same bored minds tired of wondering whether passion will ever come their way. —*Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, II 386-7

All rules broken—allusive, disjointed, ungrammatical, yet there is a personality behind every word. Letter-writing needs time—the time that Walpole and Madame de Sévigné had—but it needs also the gift of expression. A soldier's diary is infinitely more descriptive than the official *History of the War*. The diary will tell of simple, small, vivid things—mud and smells and jokes. The official *History* will deal with vast world-events, and leave them colourless. The secret of the good letter is the secret of the good diary—the recordance of the trivial, the intimate, the familiar. The account of the Retreat from Mons may stir the imagination and create a picture of a great, heroic disaster. But the diary will do more. It will create a picture of Jones in the great

## On the Writing of Letters

disaster, Jones smoking a cigarette, or rubbing a bruised shoulder. It has the charm of the snapshot: it is at once intimate and undignified, as most snapshots are. But then the letter is for one person to read, while the *History* is for the general public.

Cowper always establishes at once this personal contact. "I imagine I see you at your box at the coffee-house—here are two rustics and your humble servant in company." He brings himself and his surroundings into touch with his correspondent—talks about the parlour, the weather, a spring day observed from his small greenhouse, or the fog of 1783, when the sun "sets with the face of a red hot salamander, and rises (as I learn from report) with the same complexion." In one paragraph he describes the escape of his goldfinch, in another he marvels about "these new air balloons," in a third he criticizes Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, or writes a Dickensian account of an election. His mind is crowded with details, impressions, comments, and he puts them down on paper as they come to him. He alludes to the new Olney game called Hockey, or writes an account of the thunderstorm bursting upon him as he went out of the parlour with his dog Mungo at his heels. Even after a century and a half, to people who have never seen or known him, Cowper is a living figure sitting in his summer-house trying to write, in spite of his neighbour's ass at Silver End, "so musically disposed." It is as vivid a picture as Doctor Johnson and Boswell at the Turk's Head, or Swift at Bury Street.

My greenhouse is never so pleasant as when we are just upon the point of being turned out of it. Now I sit with all the windows and the door wide open, and am regaled with the scent of every flower in a garden as full of flowers as I have known

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

how to make it We keep no bees, but if I lived in a hive I should hardly hear more of their music .

All the best letter-writers are egoists. it is that which makes us feel, after the lapse of a hundred years, as intimate with them as if they were our next-door neighbours. Cowper's summer-house has long been pulled down, and FitzGerald's punt drowned ages since in Thames water. It is not because of the *Task* that we love Cowper so well: nor is it through the *Rubáiyát* that we can see, as clearly as if he were in the same room, an old man in a dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, with his feet on the fender while a small boy reads to him FitzGerald, on such occasions, invariably wore a tall hat, in which was concealed a gigantic red silk handkerchief, and he would stroke his beard with a paper-knife if the small boy read particularly well. He has told us that himself, as he will tell it years hence to people still unborn. One of the sternest of the Early Christian Fathers once wrote a letter on letter-writing, only revealing himself as more human than one dreams a Christian Father to have been, in his last sentence.

The test of a letter is its utility, we should not be long-winded when there is little to be said, nor too brief when there is much

. . As for method of expression, the rhetorical is clearly to be avoided, and the simple and natural to be preferred . . The third quality in a letter is charm . . For the rest I shall only add what I once heard a clever man say about an eagle, that when the birds were setting about electing a king and each came decked out in his different finery, the finest thing about the eagle was that he did not set up to be fine. . . . But perhaps these rules should not be applied to myself, who have greater matters on hand <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory of Nanzianus to Nicobulus, c. A.D. 370, quoted in *Private Letters Pagan and Christian*, ed D Brooke

## *On the Writing of Letters*

Some of the loveliest letters ever written are those of Katherine Mansfield. She seldom writes of things outside her own intimate and personal experience, and the beauty of her letters is in the small photographic flashes—"It's very quiet. A bird chirrup, a man in wooden shoes goes by or 'T's raining fast now on the shutters, a sound I love to hear. She describes a woman sitting against the trunk of a tree, combing her hair, or the occupants of neighbouring tables at a café, or glistening lizards on the branch of a palm. It is just as if she were walking by your side, talking in the kind of allusive, disjointed way one does talk on a country stroll. Small incidents pass, are commented on lightly, and as lightly fade and are forgotten, as newer trifles rise to the surface of the mind. Her alertness, awareness of mind, her gaiety, her quickness of eye, give her letters something that is always present in great literature—a feeling that every sentence is stamped with the impress of a living and virile personality.

For the only unity of the letter is the Ego. The unity of the essay is the theme, but a letter has no theme. That is its charm. It is discursive, allusive, intimate, as is the ordinary speech between friends, and all letters should ramble as the mind rambles on a country walk. The letter writer follows his thoughts, catches them as they flit by, and sets them higgledy piggledy on paper, making no effort at marshalled presentation, no effort to preserve sequence of mood or matter. He "shoots his thoughts as they come by," like Samuel Butler. If a letter is an art at all, it is the "Gentlest Art"—the art of being artless. It should break off as if to imply that it might have gone on for ever.

"That's rayther a sudden pull up, ain't it, Sammy?" inquired Mr. Weller.

## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

"Not a bit on it," said Sam, "she'll vish there wos more, and that's the great art o' letter-writin' "

The charm of a conversation is its allusiveness, its intimacy; and that is the chief charm also in the letters of FitzGerald (a conversational *bouillabaisse*), as when he describes himself "going out for the evening to the old lady who teaches me the names of the stars and other chaste information," or "lying at full length on a bench in the garden" reading about Nero, "a nightingale singing and some red anemones eyeing the sun not far off." Again and again the cynical and practical mind of Swift becomes crowded with trivial and absorbing gossip—"Is that tobacco or what? I do not remember I slobbered. Lord, I dreamed of Stella, etc., so confusedly last night, and that we saw Dean Bolton and Sterne go into a shop" Or he will give a picture of himself on a snowy morning, "vengeance cold."

I am not yet up, but cannot write long, my hands will freeze  
Is there a good fire, Patrick? Yes, sir Then I will rise. come,  
take away the candle You must know I write on the dark side of  
my bed-chamber, and am forced to have a candle till I rise, for  
the bed stands between me and the window, and I keep the curtains  
shut this cold weather So pray let me rise, and, Patrick, here,  
take away the candle

There is nothing here that reflects the actions in which Swift took such interest during 1710 and 1711 Devoured as he is by his ambition, and proudly conscious of his power, it is the interludes of his life which he delights to describe to Stella—dinners over the way, bathes in the river on June nights, rather expensive gatherings at the Brother's Club His charming Irish servant, Patrick, appears now and again staggers in drunk at midnight, and is cursed and dismissed and forgiven again, in the manner of "Perry" and

## *On the Writing of Letters*

Pipes. And yet in those years, ever since he left Laracor, Swift was the leading figure in the "Walpurgis dance of political witches" that revolved round kindly, cautious, dull, honest Harley and his brilliant and untrustworthy colleague. Swift, like Lamb, deals with the "tremendous trifles of existence" but he lacks that lightness of touch which makes Lamb and Cowper the perfect letter writers. It is lightness of touch that is the charm of such letters on nothing and everything. Lewis Carroll was a master of the art. In the same year as Johnson wrote this in a letter to his most intimate friend

I am glad that you are going to be married and as I wish you well in things of less importance, wish you well with proportionate ardour in this crisis of your life,

Gray wrote this to his

And so you have a garden of your own, and you plant and transplant, and are dirty and amused! Are you not ashamed of yourself? Why I have no such thing, you monster nor shall be either dirty or amused as long as I live. My gardens are in the windows like those of a lodger up three pair of stairs in Petticoat Lane, or Camomile Street, and they go to bed regularly under the same roof that I do. Dear how charming it must be to walk out in one's own *garding* and sit on a bench in the open air with a fountain and a leaden statue, and a rolling stone, and an arbour have a care of sore throats though, and the *agoe*.

But then, of course, Doctor Johnson talked like that and Boswell would have had no difficulty in imagining him rolling in his chair and blowing like a whale and mouthing the words "proportionate ardour"—nor, I dare say, would he mind having his marriage described as a "crisis. Lightness of touch is essential for the letter which touches on a variety of topics, which rambles in shirt-sleeves among



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

trifles. "I am improved in lumbago," says Sydney Smith, "but still less upright than Aristides. Our house is full of beef, beer, young children, newspapers, libels, and mincepies, and Life goes on very well, except that I am often reminded that I am too near the end of it."

But letters have other aims than mere amusement. The letter may be like the austere raising of a hat, like a gossip over the port, like a handshake in the street. It may reveal, as the extracts above reveal, the author as he felt when he wrote, the thoughts crowding in his mind, the scenes about him. But it is more often written with the definite purpose of giving news. Even letters such as these, however, belong to the Art rather than the Business of correspondence. The gift of the letter-writer is the gift of making the tiniest gossip vivid. The shrewd wit of Mrs. Carlyle is a delightful example of the "newsy" letter at its best. She would make three pages of one naïve paragraph by Margaret Paston.

Also I pray you heartily that ye will send me a pot of treacle in haste, for I have been right evil at ease and your daughter both, since that ye weden hence, and one of the tallest young men of this parish lieth sick, and hath a great myrr, how he shall do, God knoweth.

I have sent my Uncle Burney the pot with treacle that ye did buy for him, mine Aunt recommendeth her to you and prayeth you to do for her as the bill maketh mention of, that I send you with this letter, and as ye think best to do therein. Sir Harry Inglose is passed to God this night, whose soul God assoil, and was carried forth this day at nine of the clock to St. Faith's and there shall be buried.

The elaborate letter has no place in either the art or the business of letter-writing. All Lord Chesterfield's letters are sermons. All James Howell's so-called *Familiar Letters* are essays—one of them actually a history in over four thousand

## *On the Writing of Letters*

words of the Moorish occupation of Spain. Dr Johnson writes two letters on the subject of his health. The one begins

Travelling thus far to obtain the smiles of Hygeia, I am ordered to wait upon her naiads on the ocean brim, during a period of equal length with that on which I courted those who administer to her soft fountains in Derbyshire.

Which means he is going for a fortnight to the seaside. To Boswell he is more simple, and therefore more readable

My health grows better yet I am not fully recovered. I believe it is held that men do not recover very fast after three-score. I hope yet to see Beattie's College and have not given up the Western voyage. But however all this may be or not, let us try to make each other happy when we meet, and not refer our pleasure to distant times or distant places.

How comes it that you tell me nothing of your lady? I hope to see her some time, and till then shall be glad to hear of her

But there are letters that are duties rather than pleasures. Even here, however, style is essential. It has yet to be fully realized that no man without a knowledge of the art of writing can translate well or explain clearly, or even write a good postcard, or be a first-class geometrician. Euclid was, after all, as great a master of prose as Bacon. His writings are the supreme examples of clarity, simplicity, and conciseness. The end of Art "is or should be to profit and delight."<sup>1</sup> A business letter contains neither moral instruction nor æsthetic beauty. Its end is simple statement, question, or demand. Yet it must still observe the same rules of writing that were observed by Euclid. And these rules are not to be learnt by the use of symbols, however brief, however

Ben Jonson.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

cryptic Hieroglyphs have their place in legal documents—the nadir of literature, the antipodes of artistic expression. But to use symbols is to use other men's minds. I am not suggesting the writing of a business letter which is original in the sense of being unlike any other business letter in the world. But I am suggesting that a clear, simple, concise letter is the perfect business letter. Pater, says George Moore, could write an invitation to dinner in his own unmistakable way. and though still individual, it was briefer, simpler, and more clear than anyone else's. The average business letter pullulates with insincere, half-digested clichés, ready-made phrases, built to measure and guaranteed to fit.

The same rules are true of all these "compulsory" letters. The "thank-you" letter is the commonest and dreariest of all rituals. All that can be said is said in the first four words, everything else is mere repetition. The one rule for the "thank-you" letter should be, I think, that it must never on any account begin with the words "Thank you." They have become stripped of their meaning. and to work up a paroxysm of gratitude—"thanks most *terribly*," with underlinings and exclamation marks, is only decking a corpse, "smearing a dead thing with gold."

This is how Cowper thanks Lady Hesketh for the gift of a desk

Oh that this letter had wings, that it might fly to tell you that my desk, the most elegant, the compactest, the most commodious desk in the world, and of all the desks that ever were or ever shall be, the desk that I love the most, is safe arrived . . . My precious Cousin, you have bestowed too much upon me. I have nothing to render you in return but the affectionate feelings of a heart most truly sensible of your kindness. How pleasant it is to write upon such a green bank!

## *On the Writing of Letters*

And later

My desk is always pleasant, but never so pleasant as when I am writing to you. If I am not obliged to you for the thing itself, at least I am for your having decided the matter against me, and resolving that it should come in spite of all my objections. Before it arrived, Mrs. Urwin had spied out for it a place that exactly suits it. A certain fly-table in the corner of the room, which I had overlooked, affords it a convenient stand when it is not wanted, and it is easily transformed to a larger when it is. If I must not know to whom I am principally indebted for it, at least let me entreat you to make my acknowledgements of gratitude and love.

All this for a desk—and yet it is not fulsome. A fulsome letter is one crowded with meaningless adjectives, or crowded with adjectives that have too much meaning, forbidden words glonous, superb. "

In a letter of consolation the temptation to become fulsome is severe. Yet even fulsomeness (even a sort of newspaper panegyric) is better than a list of trite and dreary platitudes. The reason why one is tempted to use ready made phrases ("sad loss, grievous trouble, "passed away") is because it is a ready made occasion. You are writing to order, and truth is often impossible. But simplicity is never impossible and it is better to tell the truth simply than to dress up the ghost of an emotion in a panoply of hollow phrases. Sincere grief will banish of its own accord the triteness that waits round the corner for every man who writes from the head and not from the heart. Nothing is easier than to detect a lack of sincerity, however elaborately it may be concealed. Van Gogh used to call it "Green Soap"—the green soap of prettiness and false rhetoric, of slick music and sentimental pictures the soap with which such an unnecessary amount of linen is publicly washed.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Brevity is essential. Brevity is the soul of clarity and the best training for concise and clear expression is the telegram. To express a complex idea in twelve words clearly and without the aid of punctuation is a genuine test. But in a telegram there is little opportunity for elaborate emotion. In a letter of consolation there is. Pathos is one of those moods that cannot be deliberately cultivated. Deliberate pathos leads straight to sentimentality—to Green Soap. Dickens works himself into a passion of grief over little Nell and little Paul Dombey—and I for one invariably skip their respective death-scenes. Pathos is so subtle that it can only be attained by the use of great artistic restraint. Barrie's Peter Pan has the same element of pathos which is present in all his work. Barrie is continually tottering on the verge of sentimentality, and continually saving himself by this restraint. A superb example of pathos is the closing chapter of *Peter and Wendy*, or this characteristic passage from Thackeray:

Esmond thought of the courier now galloping on the north road to inform him who was Earl of Arran yesterday that he was Duke of Hamilton to-day, and of a thousand great schemes, hopes, ambitions, that were alive in the gallant heart, beating a few hours since, and now in a little heap of dust, quiescent<sup>1</sup>

The beauty and dignity of the rhythm is full of a pathos that is only covertly indicated. When pathos is flaunted, it is hideous:

The first touch satisfied her of what had happened, and she laid it down quietly from whence she had taken it, on the counterpane . . . None of this world's heat, they knew, would ever warm that little hand again; none of its joys or sorrows bring either smiles or tears to that little, still, white face on the pillow!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Esmond*

<sup>2</sup> *Froggy's Little Brother*

## VII

### ON THE WRITING OF NARRATIVE

#### I

##### I EXPERIMENTS IN NARRATIVE

Story writing is the ideal field for experiment. The first two things which appeal to children are rhythm and plot—the rattle and the fairy tale—and there is no easier or more profitable way of arousing enthusiasm than by the invention of a story. It is possible for a child to *believe* far more completely than an adult. Small children are really exactly like Eric—crammed with sentimentality and melodrama—only they don't show it, as Eric did. They have an inborn narrative sense, and they have too such amazing powers of visualization. My own gift for seeing non-existent bears was, as a child, remarkable. That is why children enjoy to the full the worst of stories. They fill in the gaps with their own creative imagination, and it is within the power of their teachers to guide and shape that imagination, to induce it to create something for itself, instead of playing on the material of other people. The invention of a story not only disguises lessons and avoids "direct teaching" (which is so often merely hammering other men's ideas into unwilling heads), but also teaches the art of characterization, dialogue, vivid presentation, rapid narrative. The writing of a story is more of a pleasure than the writing of an essay. It is always more enjoyable to invent about someone else than to tell the truth about yourself. And it will help, too, towards appreciation. For appreciation is a living thing

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

and it is very largely true that only the man who has tried and failed can really appreciate success. Appreciation cannot be taught, it can only be encouraged. By the writing of a story the first of the novelist's difficulties is revealed, and the eyes are opened to a thousand things taken entirely for granted. Not until a man has tried to write for himself can he realize the colossal labour of construction, the hundred small subtleties of characterization, description, climax. It will be the teacher's business to make the writing of the story something more than a mere diversion: to make it a means to the learning of composition by actual experiment, and above all a high-road to the appreciation of literature. That will be no easy task—

The fall of ev'ry Phrygian stone will cost  
A drop of Grecian blood The end crowns all

But the end at which he aims is something he will have to wait long to see accomplished—the awakening of a love for beauty, of the craftsman's joy in creation, of a passionate worship, “this side idolatry,” for the makers of English Literature

### 2. THE SHORT STORY

Writing is a “selective process”, and it is therefore no use calling a slice of raw life a story. Life is the worst constructed and most inartistic tale in existence. It never reaches its *dénouement* without a hint of some continuation in our next . . .

When we first begin to write stories for ourselves, we write compressed novels of the picaresque. That is to say, we take one or more heroes, describe their adventures for an indefinite period, and then stop, perhaps with marriage,

## On the Writing of Narrative

perhaps death—perhaps merely stop. Now the manner and technique of the short story really is something that can be taught. A short story is a very limited species. It deals with one unique incident towards which all other incidents tend. One chief character is involved in that series of incidents. It is distinguishable by imagination, by brevity, by a plot which presents a number of closely related events in a single, vivid, *unified* focus. Now a novel can be supremely great and lack any plot at all—as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gil Blas* and *Lavengro* lack plots. A plot is not a mere intrigue, not mere complexity of incident. It is a tangle, so closely woven and interrelated that "no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole."<sup>1</sup> The *Forsyte Saga* is simply a series of logical sequences in the ordinary sense of the word. It has no plot, but (like the *Old Wives Tale*) a central theme, with a number of tributary themes leading from and connected with it. The theme of the *Forsyte Saga* is the tragedy of the unlovable man: the subsidiary theme is the tragedy that "old men love and young men die." The omission of the death of Bosinney or the death of Old Jolyon would not ruin the main theme—the tragic isolation of Soames. But in a short story the omission of a single paragraph would damage the entire work. The *Indian Summer of a Forsyte* is an episode; the *Masque of the Red Death* is a short story.

### 3 IDEA AND PLOT

There are three things necessary for the short story—the idea, or theme, the plot, and the situation. Anyone can have ideas," said Arnold Bennett, but it takes a genius to

Edgar Poe, *Graham's Magazine* April 1841



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

work them out." You need never be "gravelled for lack of matter." If an idea refuses to come to him, the sensible man goes for a ride on the top of a bus, turns into the nearest pub, or has a conversation with the cook. Henry James used to get ideas from the faces he saw in the streets, as Arnold Bennett drew his idea for the *Old Wives' Tale* from a grotesque old lady in a restaurant. Ideas come; plots are the result only of really hard work. If idea and plot are separated in any short story, the idea will be found to be old enough, however ingenious its presentation. Of how many hundred tales has not the story of Rahab in the *Book of Joshua* been the basis? Originality merely means a shift in the point of view. It does not necessarily imply horror or astonishment. And to be "unmannerly breeched with gore" is usually to become insincere. The skilful "snap" at the end of so many of Bierce's stories is effective only for a short time, only when there is a real idea behind them. Mere gruesomeness will not create originality. A writer will either deal with things which he has himself wholly or in part experienced, or with things that neither he nor anyone else has experienced. Even if he must experiment with truth, truth must be there. It was with that deliberate intention that Marcel Proust in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* left blank the death-scene till he could dictate it while he lay in the agony of his own last illness. For the only reason why anyone sincerely writes creative fiction is because he is excited and fascinated by life. "Just after I had got out of my bath this morning," Carlyle once told Allingham, "and was drying myself—getting into a kind of fury or exaltation of mind, I exclaimed, 'What the devil then am I at all, at all?' After all these eighty years I know nothing about it!" Such a fury and exaltation of mind makes the novelist, the

## On the Writing of Narrative

poet, the artist attempt to analyse or to convey to others the sense of the mystery of existence. Fundamentally the desire to create is a result of the sense of wonder. *Admire as much as you can,* writes Van Gogh to his brother, *most people do not admire enough."*<sup>1</sup>

The idea and the presentation of the idea are the two chief difficulties of the artist. H. G. Wells, who has questioned everything, found that he gained an idea merely by questioning an old proverb. Is it true that the one-eyed man is king? He wrote the *Country of the Blind*. The idea is the attack on the truth of the proverb. The plot is the adventure of the Spanish mountaineer, the discovery of the hidden valley of the blind man, the description of his falling in love, the crisis of pursuit and escape. It is possible that Michael Arlen took his idea for the *Gentleman from America* out of the following passage in the *Table Talk* of Coleridge

It was, I think, in the University of Cambridge near Boston, that a certain youth took it into his wise head to convert a Tom Paineish companion of his by appearing as a ghost before him. He accordingly dressed himself up in the usual way having previously extracted the ball from the pistol which always lay near the head of his friend's bed. Upon first awaking, and seeing the apparition, the youth who was to be frightened, A., very coolly looked his companion the ghost in the face, and said, "I know you. This is a good joke but you see I am not frightened. Now you may vanish!" The ghost stood still. "Come," said A., "that is enough. I shall get angry. Away!" Still the ghost moved not. "By ——" ejaculated A., "If you do not in three minutes go away I'll shoot you!" He waited the time, deliberately levelled the pistol, fired, and, with a scream at the immobility of the figure, became convulsed and afterwards died.

There is the idea—the developed plot starts with the story

*Letters of Vincent van Gogh to His Brother* L. 15

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

of a bet, and delays and heightens the climax by the meeting that takes place years afterwards between the ghosts and their victim. A good idea clumsily presented will make a bad story, and the technique of the story is a laborious and highly complicated study.

### 4 WORKING OUT IDEAS

Supposing we wanted an idea for a story. The germ might come from witnessing a tiny incident. a man puts a jug of cold water on the top of a door to entrap another, and inadvertently opens the door himself, and is hoist with his own petard—the old idea of the Biter Bit. But suppose we gave it a tragic significance? Suppose a man said that something dreadful had happened, for a practical joke—and the remark came true. There is the idea. The situation develops from it. The tale is going to be tragic, and therefore needs a background that can harmonize. This does not mean a mediaeval castle, or a moonlit lake, or any of the trappings of the Eighteenth-century School of Terror. Let us say a lift—or, better still, a third class railway carriage. In the carriage we place a middle-aged man, and the plot comes. Another man enters, pretends for a joke that he has murdered the engine driver and that the train is about to crash. He is just on the point of confessing that it was all a joke when the train actually *does* crash. Then we go back to the beginning, for as it stands the story is merely incredible. Why, in the first place, should the middle-aged man believe his companion at all? We lay emphasis on the fact that he is suffering from nerves and on the edge of a breakdown—is going away for a rest-cure. We start by giving the scene:

The South-Eastern express rattled noisily over the points, and crashed under the station bridge

## *On the Writing of Narrative*

We then introduce the middle-aged man we make him jump at the reverberation, and in a paragraph we lay stress on his nervous condition. But even that is not sufficient. Circumstantial evidence must be added. We show him trying to read the *Daily Mirror*, and staring blankly at the portrait of a tall man in horn-rimmed spectacles—a dangerous homicidal maniac. The problem is now stated the reader has been given the clue. Enter a tall man in horn-rimmed spectacles, but that must not be stressed. "The middle-aged man," we might say,

usually hated his fellow travellers, but he found himself longing after a time for a human being to talk to. The stranger was a large man with a slight stoop, and (as his thick spectacles testified) of very weak sight.

There follow a few moments of conversation, during which it is necessary to make clear the overwhelming temptation which assails the stranger to play a practical joke on his companion. The middle-aged man, therefore, talks about his nervous condition, mentions perhaps the queer sense of imminent danger that weighs on his mind. The stranger's eye falls on the paper

"Ah," cries the middle-aged man, as the train rocks and rattles into a sudden blackness, "we are in a tunnel. I can't help imagining all sorts of frightful horrors every time we go through a tunnel. Supposing we just stopped like this, in the dark."

The stranger does not answer, but glances keenly and so on. His lips curl in a slow, peculiar smile.

The reader does not know, of course, that he is not a genuine lunatic, and has more or less been prepared for the shock when the stranger leans forward and remarks, "Excuse

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

my mentioning it, but I see you have been looking at my portrait."

Then follows the Conversation, the main body of the story, a conversation which emphasizes the cheerful irony of the stranger and the hysteria of his companion. The tale is filled out by the stranger's account of himself and his life—how he has passed from sensation to sensation, until the only thing left for him to test is the ultimate ecstasy, the last of all thrills—death. Then the crisis approaches, the tension becomes more acute, till the stranger suddenly realizes that a cruel practical joke has been carried too far. The middle-aged man is made nearly mad with fear, gripped with the terrific, commonplace horror of approaching death. The climax might come something like this:

He stared wildly at the blurred rush of telegraph poles and trees, the wide, familiar sweep of greenness and blue sky, and began suddenly to choke with great tearing sobs, like a child.

The stranger leant forward

"I say," he said, "I say——"

There was a splitting crash, like the explosion of a bomb. The floor of the carriage seemed suddenly to heave under their feet.

The climax is reached, and the hardest part in the story reached also. For how is the *point* to be revealed? Perhaps the middle-aged man could wake up the next morning in a hospital bed, to discover himself next door to the stranger. But a lapse of time is always weak: it breaks the tale up, destroys unity, and brings it near to an anticlimax. Therefore we bring the hysterical victim as soon as possible to his senses, and find him in a heap of ruins. Someone bends tenderly over him, and he finds himself looking into the face of the stranger. Now here the story must move as rapidly

## On the Writing of Narrative

as possible to its close bathos dogs every step. In only a few words the injured man denounces the stranger for murder, for his infernal search for sensation. It must end even more quickly than this

The stranger gazed at him dreadingly

"It was a lie," he said at length in a low voice.

"What do you mean?"

"It was a lie," repeated the stranger "It was all a lie! A silly practical joke on your nervousness. Do you think I expected *this*? Man, I'm no more of an escaped lunatic than you are!"

"But you said—you said there was no engine driver——"

"Of course there was," said the stranger gloomily

### 5 LOGICAL SEQUENCE

The point to remember is that no word should be put in that has not its bearing on the story. This is merely a "trick" story (and not a very serious one), with no real theme or character drawing, and not a very difficult thing to do. But it serves to emphasize the difference between an episode (like most of the contents of Galsworthy's *Caravan*), a condensed novel, like the stories in *Don Quixote*, and a true short story, like *Metzengerstein*, or *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, or the *Necklace*, or the *Two Householders*.

Every incident in a short story must be in a logical sequence. Without logical sequence it is impossible to be wholly convincing. It is only by the slow cumulation of events that Shakespeare renders credible the mad jealousy of Othello. The dramatist's audience can see and hear. The author's audience can only think and use its imagination. If Sterne were to have made Uncle Toby murder Walter Shandy in the course of one of their discussions about the flow of ideas, or whether they should call the boy Trisme-

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

gistus, the reader would reject it as an impossibility. But H. G. Wells can make us believe in an angel. Bernard Shaw can make us believe in the devil. Given the premiss—that, for instance, it is possible for a man to discover a method by which he may render himself invisible, or that a man might discover a country populated by creatures a few inches high—and the *Invisible Man* and *Gulliver* become nearly probable. However fantastic the premiss, it will always be accepted if the writer takes enough trouble to be logical. One event must not only follow naturally, but inevitably from another. The climax is the only possible result of a series of circumstances, as is the suicide of Anna Karenina, or the infidelity of Madame Bovary. That is what paragraphs are for. They are in the short story what chapters are in the novel, and each paragraph contains one more brick towards the completion of the building. The first paragraph of Poe's *Ligeia* introduces the chief figure in the story, dwelling upon the author's love for her. The second minutely describes the beauty of Ligeia, the third and fourth her eyes, the fifth her tremendous, restrained power of will. So the story proceeds, careful step by step, towards the climax, and not a single paragraph could be omitted, for each dovetails into the next as do the first five. It is a serious fault to look back in time: it is often an irritating feature in the tales of Ambrose Bierce. To run to and fro, to bring one chapter or paragraph up to a point and to jump back in the next is bad technique. It can be successful—it is brilliantly so in *Mr. Polly*—but if one event must be explained by some previous event, then that previous event should have been alluded to before. Any vital thing that has happened before the opening of the story should be explained by dialogue, letters, reverie—any method rather than the clumsy "throw-back." Coinci-

## On the Writing of Narrative

dence must never be employed. It mars *David Copperfield* and I have sometimes thought that the fog which killed Bosinney was rather too convenient. Each event must be so linked to what has happened before as to wear a certain air of inevitability. The rich uncle from America, the millionaire *deus ex machina*, the timely grave—these things happen in life, but should be avoided in the artistic rendering of life which we call literature. For every incident there should be a clue, but the clues must not be emphasized, for emphasis makes things obvious, and to be obvious is to be dull. Readers are just as clever as writers, and it needs some ingenuity to hoodwink them. But, after all, the writer must play fair. If Mabel is going to die suddenly at the end of the story, it is only just that she should be given a cold at the beginning of it. To make a clue obvious, however, is to irritate and weary the reader. "How little did he realize what was in store for him! Such a remark gives away too much. For a clue need only be the faintest foreshadowing of the future—not so much a clue as a hint.

So they buzzed idly on with their sunlit gossip and drowsy commentaries, until a bank of clouds overtook the sun and the water became leaden. Jenny shivered.

"Someone sitting on my grave," she said. —COMPTON MACKENZIE, *Carnival*, chapter xxxvi.

A remark of that kind is only noticed when Jenny is shot on that same bank, in the last paragraph of the book. And again, in the *Mill on the Floss* (chapter x)

"They're such children for the water mine are," she said, without reflecting that there was no one to hear her. "they'll be brought in dead and drowned some day. I wish that river was far enough.



## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

### 6 CLIMAX

Logical sequence is not enough, it must be a cumulative sequence. Each scene increases the tension and suspense. This can be done in the paragraph: it is one of the common devices of oratory

And nowe I would aske a straung question Who is the most diligent bishoppe and prelate in al England, that passeth al the reste in doing his office I can tel, for I knowe him, who it is I knowe him well But nowe I thinke I se you lysting and hearken- ing, that I shoulde name him There is one that passeth al the other, and is the moste diligent prelate and preacher in al England And wyl ye knowe who it is? I wyl tel you It is the Devyl —  
LATIMER, *Sermon on the Plough*

Or Bunyan has a splendid piece of cumulative rhetoric in the preface to the *Life and Death of Mr Badman*

. Shall we not cry out, and cry, They are drunk, but not with Wine, they stagger, but not with strong drink, they are intoxicated with the deadly poyson of sin

The story should be cumulative in something of the same way. It should be written with one object, and every incident should point in the same direction. The focus of a tale is called its climax—which is the Greek for a ladder. In a story, it is the topmost rung of the ladder, the point whither each step leads, the apex, the culmination, which is the climax. The only true climax is death or marriage—and even they are sometimes episodes, or anticlimaxes, or perhaps only beginnings . A novel usually ends with one of these two—the chief character dies (as in the *Modern Comedy*), or he gets married (as in *Tom Jones*) But in the short story the climax need only be the instantaneous unravelling of knots A story should be like a series of squibs, each one

## *On the Writing of Narrative*

setting fire to another slightly larger, and finally ending with a rocket and a blaze of coloured stars. You climb your ladder step by step, each step a little higher than the last, a slow cumulation of interest or suspense, till you reach the top and then you come down by the quickest method you may. Climb the mountain and fall down the precipice. To "wind up" in the manner of the older novelists will lead to anticlimax. Briefly and completely, the climax should unravel the threads. A story cannot climb continually, and there is no fixed rule. Somewhere must always come a pause, a preparation for the climax. In one of Bierce's stories, *John Bartine's Watch*,<sup>1</sup> there appear to me to be seven divisions. The first is the minor crisis of the first three paragraphs, to fix the attention of the reader. John Bartine shows unaccountable agitation when he is asked the time. The second is a preparation for the climax, a conversation between John Bartine and his friend, in which Bartine explains the history of the watch. Then comes another, intenser crisis, when Bartine confesses the curious dread he experiences whenever he looks at the watch before eleven o'clock. From that point the story rises swiftly to its culmination.

Part 4. Increase of suspense, heightened by scenic description.

Part 5. Further important crisis, where the hands of the watch are altered.

Part 6. The climax. John Bartine, asked the time, looks at his watch, and falls dead.

Part 7. The conclusion, an explanation.

The proportion of these divisions is as follows. *Part One* half a page. *Part Two* two and a half pages. *Part*

*Can Such Things Be?*

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

*Three* one and a half pages. *Part Four* two pages. *Part Five*. four lines. *Part Six* one page. *Part Seven* twenty lines

It will be seen that the longest divisions are parts two and four—the Preparation and the Period of Suspense. These are the longest divisions in any story. The climax must be swift. the conclusion even swifter.

### 7 MATERIAL AND PREPARATION

The preparation for the story is long and arduous. The true short story writer notices everything, and jots down ideas and details in his notebook. Practice is everything. A scholar must train as rigorously as a gymnast. so must a writer, and more also. Some scenes will have to be written and rewritten a dozen times: but the more time spent in preparation, the less spent in correction. If one has to write a chapter of a story dealing with Jacobean London, or the reign of Richard II, one will devour Macaulay and Froissart and Walsingham, and imbibe a very creditable amount of knowledge without even being conscious of imbibing it. Time spent in drawing maps of the scene of the story or illustrating costumes, in reading history or in learning of the ways of highwaymen is never wasted. So English can be welded to History and Geography, and imagination make vivid all three. For that, I think, is what matters. One used to be taught, and too often still is taught, to know the dates of the kings of England long before one knew anything about the men themselves: to know the date of the Black Death long before one had any conception of what it really was. No fact is of the smallest value unless it is painted on the pictorial background of the imagination—and then it will never be forgotten. The value of facts is to show the direction of the stream, the influence of event on event,

## *On the Writing of Narrative*

cause and effect. It is useless to know the date of the battle of the Armada and to know nothing of the slow processes that led to such a climax. The best method of learning anything about the Armada is to write a story about Drake. You will finish by knowing something of Elizabethan London, of Queen Elizabeth, of Philip II and the Spanish Main and the rigging of a galleon. All of which is of vastly more imaginative importance than a name or a date. I would rather have a real appreciation of the ballad of the *Revenge* than a knowledge of the exact date of every event in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The importance of the date is not to be underestimated but its importance comes at a later stage. It is only after one knows and can imagine events, that one will wish to know their relation to one another and how they fit into the general scheme of history

## VIII

### ON THE WRITING OF NARRATIVE

#### II

##### I CHARACTER DRAWING

It is neither plot nor idea which makes a short story living: it is character. And character drawing is a matter of long apprenticeship and constant practice. It is only in the later books of most authors that incident gives place to character and puppets become human beings. Certainly in the first half of *Pickwick* the magnificent Quartette are caricatures, and it is only when life steps in with Mr. Weller that the book becomes great. The early novels of Wells depend for their interest on plot and idea. It is with *Bert Smallways* that Kipps and Mr. Polly become possible, and the *War in the Air* is a kind of bridge between the physical adventures of the Time Traveller and the spiritual adventures of Mr. Britling.

For the novel is not static. It is a series of rapidly changing impressions, producing a cumulative effect. In the short story this effect is gained very much more concisely, but it is gained by the same methods. No sooner has one impression been given than the page is turned over and a new impression added: and, unless that first impression is continually referred to, it will become blurred, disfigured, and finally lost. It is easy enough to create puppets.

One of them, a sallow, clean-shaven civilian with a thin and wrinkled face, already growing old, was nevertheless dressed as the most fashionable of young men. He sat with his legs on

## On the Writing of Narrative

the sofa as if quite at home, and having stuck an amber pipe far into his mouth was inhaling the smoke intermittently with his eyes half-closed. This was the old bachelor Shishin, a cousin of the countess, a man with a sharp tongue they said of him in Moscow society. He seemed to be condescending to his interlocutor a level. The other a fresh rosy officer of the Guards, immaculately washed, buttoned-up and brushed, held his pipe in the middle of his mouth and with pink lips gently inhaled the smoke, letting it escape from his handsome mouth in rings.—*War and Peace*, I. xviii.

Here is a great novelist distinguishing the persons of his story at the outset merely by the way in which they smoke their pipes. A character is a creature that, once set in motion, seems after a little to become independent of the author. Nearly all characters are puppets at the start, like Shishin and Berg, but in a few pages they appear to escape from their labels and to act and speak with an individuality distinct from their creator's. A character in a book is given a certain peculiarity—the vocabulary of Mr. Polly, the polysyllabic unction of Chadband—but with that alone he remains a mere caricature, a creature repeating the same lifeless idiosyncrasies whenever he appears. In that way most of the figures in the plays of Jonson and Massinger are puppets. It is not easy to create the impression of real life. A character distinguished by eccentricity alone is a character only seen superficially. We distinguish strangers by their peculiarities of voice or movement. We know nothing of their inner emotions. It is only possible to create character by creating an imaginative background to the people. The character of a man is not a matter of the moment, but of the accumulation of countless experiences, of environment, even of primeval impulses, buried and forgotten ten thousand years. It is not easy to realize that the servant who opens the door to

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

us—that prim, tidy abstraction of deportment—has a life behind her as coloured and romantic as our own. It is that which makes her human, and only the cap and apron which make her the serving-maid. And it is this quality which distinguishes the great characters of fiction. We can, as it were, see only one side of Blifil. He is a creature in the flat, merely an evil little prig, and nothing more, but we can see all round Tom Jones himself. We know what he would be likely to do in any circumstances, how he would react to any emotion. He is human, living. But Blifil can only react in one way, he is a prig, and nothing but a prig. And no one in real life is capable of being one thing alone. The most niggardly of misers has his generous moments, the least emotional cynics his sentimental moods. In *Dombey and Son* Carker was all teeth, in real life he was very much more.

Thus it is possible to see a puppet become suddenly alive, to see him leap out of the author's control. In Mary Webb's greatest novel, *Gone to Earth*, I remember, one of the chief characters is a man called Edward Marston. Now up to page 247 Edward is a cipher, a composite of all the most abstract of the virtues, dignified, irreproachable, restrained. On page 247 he meets Reddin, and—"Beast!" Edward exclaimed tersely. . . . He becomes with one word a character.

Character drawing is the result of imaginative sympathy. Only he who has been trained to speculate about the people he meets can re-create them. But the chief difference between the puppet and the character is that the puppet is static and the character is cumulative. When we meet Don Armado for the first time we know as much about him as when we bid him a reluctant farewell. Of Othello we know only a little, we know of his reputation and his courage. It is only later and by degrees that we learn of his adventures, his

## *On the Writing of Narrative*

devotion to his wife, his trustful simplicity, and the capacity of his strange nature for profound and violent passions. It is impossible therefore to describe a character wholly in one paragraph. The method of the older novelists was to paint a minute description of the appearance of their characters, and later to fill in their moods and thoughts and feelings. Mr Squeers is thus introduced

He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice is in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental; being of a greenish-grey and in shape resembling the fan-light of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low protruding forehead which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the middle size—he wore a white neckerchief with long ends and a suit of scholastic black but his coat-sleeve being a great deal too long and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.  
—*Nicholas Nickleby*, chapter iv

This is exhaustive—a little too exhaustive. The modern manner favours impressionism. Stevenson gains his effects by the phrase rather than the paragraph yet no one ever forgets the pocked face and the pale eyes, “with a kind of dancing madness in them,” which made Alan Breck so romantic a figure. No one ever forgets the face of Long John Silver—“as big as a ham, plain and pale, but intelligent and smiling.” Where the description is detailed, it is concentration on *selected* detail rather than an attempt to be encyclopaedic



## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

He waited for some word, some sign, for some threatening stir. Nothing! Only two unwinking eyes glittered intently at him above the white sleeve. He saw the raised arm detach itself from the face and sink along the body. A white-clad arm, with a big stain on the white sleeve. A red stain. There was a cut on the cheek. It bled. The nose bled too. The blood ran down, made one moustache look like a dark rag stuck over the lip, and went on in a wet streak down the clipped beard on one side of the chin. A drop of blood hung on the end of some hairs that were glued together, it hung for a while, and then took a leap down to the ground. Many more followed, leaping one after another in close file. One alighted on the breast and glided down instantly with a devious vivacity, like a small insect running away, it left a narrow, dark track on the white skin—CONRAD, *Outcast of the Islands*, IV 1v.

Such is the description of a blow in one of the earliest and vividest of Conrad's novels. With the same minute realism is Willems's dim, unhappy wife portrayed—an impression of a torn dress, no more.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is no less effective than an impression of a face—"the squarish oval of her face shone out—the wide forehead from which the wiry black hair was combed to a high puff, the red eyes, black now, the long straight nose, the wide, laughing mouth with the enormous teeth."<sup>2</sup>

Novelists usually deny that their characters are taken from life, but creation cannot proceed from a void. All characters are amalgams. The novelist observes sympathetically the numberless living creatures with whom he comes in contact, and takes a trait here, a gesture there—creating a new personality from the crowded variety of life. And at the bottom of all his characters is himself. Truth to life and

<sup>1</sup> *Outcast of the Islands*, chapter III

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Interim*

## On the Writing of Narrative

human nature as the writer knows it means truthful representation in art, for characterization is an intuitive process. We are all made much in the same mould and if the writer thinks how he himself would react to given circumstances, how he himself would act or feel in a crisis, he will be fundamentally right. Characterization is the result of observing and sympathizing—a matter of description, action, and, above all, dialogue.

### 2. DIALOGUE

Of all the difficulties of the short story, dialogue is perhaps the hardest to master. It is exceedingly difficult to make it at once natural and relevant. Many short stories avoid the difficulty altogether by avoiding dialogue altogether. There is no word spoken at all in the *Manuscript Found in a Bottle*, in the *Pit and the Pendulum*, in the *Black Cat*, or in the majority of the tales of Edgar Poe. What dialogue there is is stilted and melodramatic. No one ever really talked like William Wilson.

"Scoundrell!" I said in a voice husky with rage, while each fresh syllable seemed to add new fuel to my fury; "Scoundrell! Impostor! Accursed villain! You shall not—you *shall not* dog me unto death! Follow me, or I stab you where you stand!"

This is sheer melodrama, the stuff of the footlights. Better no dialogue at all. But a complete lack of dialogue tends to make a story too heavy, too unreal. Osbert Sitwell's *Man Who Lost Himself* contains scarcely a word of conversation. The style suits the book, but it would suit very few. The ideal dialogue combines brevity with dramatic fitness and character. A conversation unilluminated by character drawing is redolent of bad theatres. But dialogue is an

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

artistic creation, and to that extent artificial. If a man were to make people in a novel speak as they would in real life, he would become monotonous and repetitive. Speech—the ordinary speech of ordinary people—is seldom logical, seldom even wholly coherent. There are gaps, allusions, divagations. In all art life is focused: this is excluded, that heightened—an artificial process of condensation and emphasis. Speech has to be emphasized in the same way, yet not to such an extent that we are able to realize the process it has undergone.

Then Attwater laughed softly. "These are the diversions of a lonely man," he resumed, "and possibly not in good taste. One tells oneself these little fairy tales for company. If there *should* happen to be anything in folk-lore, Mr. Hay? But here comes the claret. One does not offer you Lafitte, captain, because I believe it is all sold to the railroad dining-cars in your great country, but this Brâne-Mouton is of a good year, and Mr. Whish will give me news of it."

"That's a queer idea of yours!" cried the captain, bursting with a sigh from the spell that had bound him. "So you mean to tell me now, that you sit here evenings and ring up . . . well, ring on the angels . . . by yourself?"

"As a matter of historic fact, and since you put it directly, one does not," said Attwater. "Why ring a bell, when there flows out from oneself and everything about one a far more momentous silence? the least beat of my heart and the least thought in my mind echoing into eternity for ever and for ever and for ever."

"O look 'ere," said Huish, "turn down the lights at once, and the Band of 'Ope will oblige! This ain't a spiritual séance."

"No folk-lore about Mr. Whish—I beg your pardon, captain Huish, not Whish, of course," said Attwater.<sup>1</sup>

Here it is only after close examination that the dialogue is found to be stressed and heightened—rendered dramatic.

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, *The Ebb-Tide*, chapter ix

## On the Writing of Narrative

Men would not talk exactly like that but it is an exaggeration based on truth. No one could meet Sarah Gamp or Falstaff in the flesh but everyone has met people with one or more of their qualities or defects. They are, as it were, the quintessence of the Falstaffian or Gampish elements in the ordinary person. Not even the gallants of Charles II's court talked quite like Mirabel and Millamant but Congreve's dialogue is a sort of concentrated essence of the talk of the ordinary man of his day.

Too heightened dialogue results in melodrama, and melodrama is a vice not encouraged by an unsentimental age. With the splendid rant of *Tamurlane* has departed also, never to return, the fustian and tinsel of *Almansor*. The dialogue must not be wooden or melodramatic, it must not be unnatural, though it may artificially heighten conversation to a sparkle of epigram. It must not be photophonic. In melodrama the villain might say "As there is a God above me, I will crush the life out of you for that lie! In real life he would probably go red in the face and choke. In real life the last soliloquy of Ralph Nickleby would be limited to a few swearwords. In a melodramatic novel he cries to the Church Tower

Lie on with your iron tongue! Ring merrily for births that make expectants writhe, and marriages that are made in Hell, and toll ruefully for the dead whose shoes are worn already! Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming in of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me! Throw me on a dunghill, and let me rot there, to infect the air!"

Men do not talk like that even to themselves, and if they did, in the last hysterical moment before suicide they would not

\* Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* chapter lxii.

end each phrase with the melodious perfection of the *Idylls of the King*.

None of G. K. Chesterton's or Oscar Wilde's characters really talk like men and women. They are much too reminiscent of crowds of large and small Chestertons and Wildes, like images seen in a circle of mirrors. The short story is not a mere pattern, as, however ingeniously woven, the majority of detective stories remain. Speech is a more individual thing than gesture or appearance, and the differences in the way men talk are subtle and numerous. It is partly the words they use, partly the way they utter them. No two people in the world will describe the same event in precisely the same way. It is useless to differentiate by merely superficial details, giving one man a Yorkshire accent and another a speech interlarded with Johnsonese. It is like apportioning out peculiarities among the characters of a story, in order to distinguish one from the other. Some of the finest character-dialogue in literature is in *Don Quixote*.

"I go on then, and say that the landing-place on the opposite side was covered with mud, and slippery, and the fisherman was a great while in coming and going. However, he returned for another goat, and another, and another——"

"Suppose them all carried over," said Don Quixote, "and do not be going and coming in this manner, or thou wilt not have finished carrying them over in a twelvemonth."

"How many have passed already?" said Sancho.

"How the devil should I know?" answered Don Quixote.

"See there now! Did I not tell you to keep an exact account? Before God, there is an end of the story, I can go no further."

"How can this be?" answered Don Quixote. "Is it so essential to the story to know the exact number of the goats that passed over, that, if one error be made, the story can proceed no further?"

"No, sir, by no means," answered Sancho, "for when I desired your worship to tell me how many goats had passed, and you

## On the Writing of Narrative

answered you did not know, at that very instant all that I had to say fled out of my memory and in faith it was very edifying and satisfactory."

"So then," said Don Quixote, "the story is at an end."

"As sure as my mother is," quoth Sancho

"Verily," answered Don Quixote, "thou hast told one of the rarest tales, fables, or histories imaginable; and thy mode of relating it is such as never was nor ever shall be equalled although I expected no less from thy good sense; however I do not wonder at it, for this incessant din may have disturbed thy understanding."

"All that may be," answered Sancho "but, as to my story, I know there's no more to be told, for it ends just where the error begins in the account of carrying over the goats."

"Let it end where it will in God's name," said Don Quixote, "and let us see whether Rosinante can stir herself."

I cannot explain the charm I find in such a passage as this. One might expect a slight element of caricature in a dialogue where one of the speakers is a crazy knight, and the other a simple, downright peasant. But here there is neither and yet no single speech could be interchanged, and (as is true of all great novels) if there were no names to guide the reader he would have little difficulty in distinguishing the speaker of each remark. Such is the indefinable magic of the greatest of Shakespeare's dialogues. Each member of the Boar's Head speaks with his own unmistakable accent and, apart from Falstaff, even his three disreputable associates never utter a syllable without a tacit confession of authorship.

My dear fellow she tried to found a *salon*, and only succeeded in opening a restaurant.—*Dorian Gray*, chapter I.

If a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him.—*Ibid.*, chapter iii.

There is hardly a single person in the House worth painting

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

though many of them would be the better for a little white-washing —*Dorian Gray*, chapter vi

They get up early because they have so much to do, and go to bed late because they have so little to think about —*Ibid*, chapter xv.

Of these four quotations, one is spoken by a cynical young man, another by an elderly peer, another by an artist, and another by a very elderly lady. Yet there is no difference in their style of speech, and another name tacked on to the remark would give no incongruous result. It is the author using his characters as mouthpieces, like the persons in Johnson's *Irene*.

Even in a single word a certain amount of elementary characterization can be introduced. No two men even swear alike, "Dear me!" "Damme!" "Dearie me!" "Crikes!" — a clergyman, a major, a charwoman, and an errand boy in collision. But these are stage clergymen, stage charwomen. The charwoman in real life is much more often a Mrs Nickleby than a Sarah Gamp, the Major much more often an Allworthy than a Bagstock. The stage tradition is only conquered by observation of real life. And it is astonishing, considering how often one both sees and hears them, how little one knows of the character of an ordinary errand boy.

Hazlitt once asked West if he had ever been to Greece. "No, but I have read a descriptive catalogue of the principal objects in that country," was the reply, "and I believe I am as well conversant with them as if I had visited it." If West had been a supremely great painter, his descriptive catalogue might have been enough — as Stowe and Holinshed were enough for Shakespeare. Sympathy and observation are great virtues, but they are worth little without experience: and it is fatally true that no man can help revealing himself

## *On the Writing of Narrative*

in every line he writes. The errand boy of Gissing will have a faint air about him of melancholy and detachment the errand boy of Wilde will be curiously reminiscent of Lord Henry. One can see how much in common the mother of Sybil Vane has with the Duchess of Harley, points not to be obscured by however great an abundance of dropped h's and misspellings. All an author writes about his characters comes back like a boomerang—a disturbing thought for the creators of Spandrell and Mrs. Bloom. So we may as well honestly put ourselves in another's place. We may say, "What would I be likely to do and say and think if I were in the errand boy's position, with his emotional background and intellectual limitations?" If we are clever, we may escape detection.

### 3 DESCRIPTION

Of far greater difficulty in the short story than in the novel is Description. In all description, as I have remarked before, good work can only be done if the writer sees vividly all he describes.

One seemed all dark and red—a tract of sand,  
And someone pacing there alone,  
Who paced forever in a glimmering land,  
Lit with a low large moon.

One showed an iron coast and angry waves,  
You seemed to hear them climb and fall  
And roar rock thwarted under bellowing caves,  
Beneath the windy wall.

And one a full-fed river winding slow  
By herds upon an endless plain,  
The ragged rims of thunder brooding low  
With shadow-streaks of rain.



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

And one the reapers at their sultry toil  
In front they bound the sheaves Behind  
Were realms of uplands, prodigal in oil  
And hoary to the wind

And one a foreground black with stones and slags,  
Beyond, a line of heights, and higher  
All barred with long white cloud the scornful crags,  
And highest, snow and fire

And one an English home—gray twilight poured  
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,  
Softer than sleep—all things in order stored,  
A haunt of ancient peace

TENNYSON, *Palace of Art*.

In spite of the tropical scenes in *Enoch Arden* these verses prove that Tennyson, like any other writer, is at his best when he not only sees but knows his subject with a deep, unconscious intimacy. The first three magnificent stanzas deal with different aspects of English scenery: the fourth and fifth are European, and very inferior poetry. The last always seems to me to sum up finally and superbly the essential atmosphere of the English country. Here, in four lines, the spirit of the hills and valleys of Thomas Hardy and Hilaire Belloc!

Thus to see what you write is to avoid the insincerity of “flowery meads” and “gorgeous sunsets.” Scenery or character description cannot be stuck on to the story merely for decoration, as plaster rosettes are stuck on to a suburban mantelpiece. It must be an integral part of the tale, bearing its definite relationship to character or climax. Galsworthy, describing *Mafeking Night*, sees it through the eyes of Soames.

## On the Writing of Narrative

He wandered thus one May night into Regent Street and the most amazing crowd he had ever seen—a shrieking, whistling, dancing, jostling grotesque, and formidably jovial crowd, with false noses and mouth-organs, penny whistles and long feathers, every appanage of idiocy, as it seemed to him. His face was tickled, his ears whistled into. Girls cried: "Keep your hair on, stucco!" A youth so knocked off his top-hat that he recovered it with difficulty. Crackers were exploding beneath his nose, between his feet. He was bewildered, exasperated, offended.—*In Chancery*, chapter xiv

Or Soames travels homewards in his car, and what he sees from the window is woven in with his own thoughts so that the reader views the scenery through the eyes of Soames, so that he sees not only something of the landscape, but something more of the mind and character of the old man.

The loom of Slough faded. One was in rank country now, and he ground the handle of the window to get a little fresh air. A smell of trees and grass came in. Get boys out of England! They had funny accents in those great places overseas. Well, they had funny accents here too. Maidenhead! These sprawling villas and hotels and gramophones spoiled the river—*The Silver Spoon*, chapter fil.

Contrasted with these, Barbellion's account of his first sight of Pachmann is full of a slightly cruel wit, and sees only from the outside

Then a short, fat, middle-aged man strolled casually on to the platform, and everyone clapped violently—so it was Pachmann—a dirty, greasy looking fellow with long hair of a dirty grey colour reaching down to his shoulders, and an ugly face. He beamed on us and then shrugged his shoulders, and went on shrugging them until his eye caught the music-stool which seemed to fill him with amazement. He stalked it carefully, held out one hand to it caressingly, and, finding all was well, went two steps backwards, clasping his hands before him, and always gazing

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

at the little stool in mute admiration, his eyes sparkling with pleasure, like Mr Pickwick's on the discovery of the archaeological treasure. He approached once more, bent down, and ever so gently moved it seven-eighths of an inch nearer the piano. He then gave it a final pat with his right hand and sat down.—*Journal of a Disappointed Man*, p. 261.

This also would be too long were it in a short story. Rarely can the story afford more than the briefest paragraph of description, and scenery-painting is only justified by its relation to the climax. H. G. Wells, in his finest story, the *Country of the Blind*, devotes a long time to an account of the beauty of the valley where the blind men lived—the hills and the sunlight on the snow. That is done for a deliberate purpose—to heighten the contrast between the people and the beauty to which they are blind—to emphasize the apparent advantage which the man who is able to see has over them, and thus to emphasize indirectly his subsequent impotence. The plastering of colour which has only the vaguest relation to the theme is the chief defect of novels—of Dorothy Richardson often, of John Galsworthy sometimes. The beauty of isolated pictures cannot atone for irrelevancy. But in the stories of children there seldom occurs any temptation to stop and look about. From their point of view the more incident the better, and one event has served its purpose by merely introducing another. "He went into the hall and stumbled over the murdered body of his wife. Then he turned into the inner room. . . ." They must be trained to stop and examine everything of interest which they come across, even if it is only a corpse. Arnold Bennett can make the act of lighting the gas-jet beautiful, but time spent in describing such an incident is only justified if the impression will heighten the cumulative effect. If you wish

## On the Writing of Narrative

a man to discover anything so remarkable as the murdered body of his wife, the picture will be blurred if it is passed over too rapidly

But how, gentle Reader shall I describe the ceremony of parting, the last farewell of that dreadful day

Leaving the Reader therefore to suppose all these fine things, behold the sails already spread and the vessel cutting the waves.<sup>1</sup>

That is one way of getting over the difficulty. But the novelist's business is to select those scenes which he considers worthy of detailed treatment. The first scene of *Progress of Two* is laid in Bournemouth. The second is in Brazil. And the novelist links them up by a bald and rapid survey of the voyage

The voyage was uneventful. Hugo managed to keep clear of the sports committee, flirtations, poker parties in the smoke-room, and the chess-playing ship's doctor<sup>2</sup>

The scene should have been shifted far more rapidly. If the voyage was uneventful, five words on a telegram would have been sufficient to transfer the hero from England to America. On the other hand, pictures will become equally blurred if they are described in too great a profusion of detail. The writer selects rigidly just those impressions or details which will stamp the incident on the reader's mind. The impressions, in the case of the discovery of a murdered body, will be physical, perhaps revolting, but whatever the effect it will be dissipated by an insistence on too great a number of details. Two or three sentences are sufficient to render vivid the vilest picture

<sup>1</sup> T. Price, *Life of Moore-Carew* p. 69

<sup>2</sup> John Kitching (Constable)

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

The eyes were wide open, the stare was not an agreeable thing to encounter. The lower jaw had fallen, a little pool of saliva had collected beneath the mouth.<sup>1</sup>

Observe the selection of detail, observe, too, the subtle use of litotes, "not an agreeable thing to encounter," enormously more impressive than a list of superlatives. The strength of so much of Bierce's work seems to me to lie in its impersonality. There is the *Fact* and it is all the uglier for being left without comment. In the same way W. H. Davies<sup>2</sup> shocks the reader in describing the train accident which cost him his leg. It is the very casualness with which he remarks on the incident—as though he had noticed his misfortune with a faint irritation or surprise—that renders it so impressively vivid.

It is a difficult thing to avoid being too barren and yet to avoid a list of unnecessary minutiae which only serve the ends of obscurity. To create an appearance in a phrase, as Stevenson created Alan Breck Stewart, or in a few swift touches to paint a whole countryside, as De la Mare can sometimes do, this is the virtue and property of the poet alone. But if an impression is to be conveyed, it must remain latent throughout. Thus, to take an ordinary example, if the scene of the story is placed in a fog, it is not enough to mention the fog only once or twice. It must continually be harped upon, though, to avoid monotony or repetition, this insistence must be cleverly and unobtrusively done. Stray phrases, flashes of description, remarks in conversation: these all help variety. And variety of impression is necessary. If the fog is to be vivid, it must create not only a general impression in the reader's mind, but the appreciation of

<sup>1</sup> Bierce, *The Eyes of the Panther*

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography*

## On the Writing of Narrative

innumerable details—the slush underfoot, the passing shadows of cars in the mist, the dripping branches of the trees. Emphatically, description is not a thing which can be stuck on after the body of the story has been finished. It is not mere decoration. It must be so closely welded in with the action that it cannot be omitted without tearing the story to pieces.

For, as in every other form of literature, the style must fit the theme. If the story has occasion to describe an old charwoman standing at the door of her cottage, it is inappropriate to draw the reader's attention in a passage of elaborate poetic prose to poplar trees against the sky. The poet might think of them as green plumes—they would remind the charwoman (if she noticed them at all) of her neighbour's hat, or the feathers in a broom. If the theme is amusing, the style should be simple, swift, racy though, when cleverly done, the pontifical style of the Chester Belloc is effective. But with the pontifical style enters the prime temptation to facetiousness. If the theme is tragic, description need not indulge in sombre Johnsonese. *They*, or the *Conspiracy on Board the Midas*, show how it is possible to be poetic without becoming pedantic.

### 4. SPOOF ENDINGS

The Spoof Ending (the ghost which is no ghost the murder which, after all, has never happened) should be avoided. It can be done successfully, but only by a practised writer. The dream-device is the most ordinary and the most irritating form of the spoof ending. It spoils the impression of reality, which is an essential of the short story. It is too crude and easy a method of winding up, like the allegorical explosion which mars so many of the novels of Chesterton.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

*Alice in Wonderland* is a supremely effective example of the dream-device, but not many of us are capable of creating wonderlands. Two or three of the tales in *Widdershins* by Oliver Onions and H. G. Wells's *Under the Knife* are illustrations of how such rules may be broken with magnificent effect. The end justifies the means, but the means requires considerable justification. This is not a caution against writing "tales with a twist." A tale without a twist is more properly an episode than a short story. But never for a moment should the reader be allowed to guess what that twist is going to be. O. Henry, Maupassant, and Maurice Level manage to conceal till the last paragraph their explosive *dénouements*. Nothing makes more complete the sense of surprise and satisfaction so desirable in the short story.

That sense of surprise is endangered by the use of another common and perilous device—the story within a story. Most of the older novels (*Jonathan Wild*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphry Clinker*, *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, *Pickwick*, *Frankenstein*) are spoilt by this device. Continuity is lost, the attention diverted from the main theme and forced to wander up tributaries, which, however attractive in themselves, shed no illumination on the central idea. It is always annoying to read a prologue, to become familiar with a set of characters, and then to be forced to advance or retire several years, and perhaps to lose sight altogether of the original characters. No one fails to regret the disappearance of Christopher Sly, who is so much more interesting than the animated puppets who amuse him.

### 5 METHOD AND CONTENT

Such devices as these imperil the essential characteristic of the short story—that it must be short. The writer is

## *On the Writing of Narrative*

dealing with an artificially condensed and heightened period of time, and therefore every paragraph and every word in every paragraph must bear its proper part in the creation of a single unified impression. Any divergence from the main theme, any shift of the point of view, any sudden gap of time tends to destroy that completeness of illusion at which he aims. The balance is subtle. It is advisable to avoid the first person, unless you are quite confident that he is interesting enough to bear the weight of the narrative. On the other hand, it is easy to be too omniscient about your characters. In every novel I can remember I cannot recall a single one which introduces the reader to the minds of more than three or four of the chief actors. The disadvantage of the first-person story is its inability to enter into more than one person's thoughts throughout. The disadvantage of the impersonal story, where the narrator is a sort of god who can lift the curtain at whatever moment he chooses, is that it tends towards confusion, to the destruction of the mystery essential to a story. That is why the first person method is inevitable in the detective story, where the chief character must be shrouded by the ignorance of his Boswell.

Finally, the ultimate test of style is to read aloud all that has been written, or better still to listen while it is read aloud by someone else. No man can judge what he has written, but, read by a third person, a certain amount of detachment, of *impersonal criticism* is possible. It is a test which even such men as Scott and Thomas Hardy often fail to pass.

Be thrilled be interested. As long as the writer enjoys what he writes, as long as what he writes interests himself, the chances are (unless he be a dull fellow indeed) that it will also interest other people. I have often thought it supremely unfair that anyone should be asked to write an



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

essay on a set subject, except in an examination, where there is no alternative. To write against the grain is not only to write badly, but to make writing a labour where it should be the supremest pleasure. There is no greater delight than in talking about one's own interests or hobbies. Genuine enthusiasm is infectious, and, be the subject what it may, the writer who loves it for its own sake will be able to inspire in others a simulacrum of his own interest and delight.

## IX

### ON THE WRITING OF VERSE

"Sure, the poor woman is a little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books, and in verse too!  
—*Letters of Dorothy Osborne*, May 1, 1653

#### I THE VALUE OF VERSE

I feel that few things help more to the writing of good prose than constant practice in versification. Writing verse is like doing a cross-word, though rather more difficult it is a business of fitting words to a metre and of finding synonyms with the right number of syllables—a business where the man with the most elastic vocabulary wins. No great poet has ever written bad prose. And Shakespeare, Milton, Traherne, Dryden, Swinburne, De la Mare—these have all written some of the finest prose passages in the language. The secret is the mastery of rhythm. Read someone a poem of Shelley's and tell him (with tears of emotion) that it is a superb work of art, and you will fill him with either contempt or despair. Things seem too easy. The greatest things in literature always look the simplest.

When in the chronicle of wasted time  
I see description of the fairest wights,  
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme  
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights.

Once it has been said, it seems that anyone could have said it. These lines have the classic virtue of inevitability. Lose yourself, like Sir Thomas Browne, in a mystery, pursue your

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

reason to an O *Altitude*<sup>1</sup> and you will be confronted by a row of faces, staring at you with the same mixture of curiosity and amusement as with which Miss Matty stared at the marvellous Signor Brunoni. There is little value in mere rhapsody, in "good, strong, thick, stupefying incense smoke." But if we can show at least how even the very greatest poetry is given form, strip it to the bones and rebuild it and hammer it afresh, we can teach appreciation. For a whole volume of rhapsody on the technique of Tennyson will only outline the blacker against a white wall of interrogation one line like:

Flits by the sea-blue bird of March

It is analogous to the study of painting or music. There are people who think they appreciate Beethoven because they enjoy "nice sounds"—because they lose themselves in pleasant day-dreams, and weave the themes into a tangle of mental associations. No one fully appreciates Shakespeare until he knows something about the structure of verse. No one fully appreciates the *Meistersinger Overture* unless he can unweave and follow the turns and transformations of the themes.

One will come in time to try it—"there is a pleasure in poetic pain." Take the sonnet form and see how the octave and the sestet are welded together, answering and completing each other. See how the artist pads, elaborates, compresses: hammer at it, till the completed poem gradually arises, like Glaucus from the sea, still cumbered with tags of rhymes and half lines, *γενηρὰ καὶ πετρῶδη πολλὰ*. Then read the fourth sonnet of the *House of Life*, or Baring's Sonnet to Julian Grenfell, or the 18th or 30th Sonnet of Shakespeare. . . .

## *On the Writing of Verse*

### 2. POETRY AND PROSE

Verse writing is a thing that can definitely be taught. The poet is a craftsman and, if his gift comes as naturally as the leaves to a tree," his technique, his mastery of his tools, is the result of years of labour. And, though no one pretends to teach the gift of poetry,<sup>1</sup> there are laws enough for the handling of its tools. Technique alone is required for the writing of verse. "That talk of inspiration," said William Morris, is sheer nonsense, I may tell you that flat there is no such thing—it is a mere matter of craftsmanship. If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry, he'd better shut up, he'll never do any good at all. For the writing of poetry—that "finer spirit of all knowledge," what Shelley called the "perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things"—something is needed that can be acquired by no toil however arduous, no meditation however earnest and intent. But it is possible to learn to write good verse, as it is possible to learn to write good prose.

The difference between prose and poetry has been long debated. Prose is a vehicle for the recordance of thought. It has a loose, irregular but very distinct rhythm—a rising, swelling, pausing of sound. It has no metre. Where metre is present in prose, that prose is bad. Verse usually contains rhyme and a very regularly marked metre. Poetry contains rhythm and beauty. It is, in Aristotle's words, an imitation of life." The difference between poetry and prose is partly one of rhythm. The occasional rhythmic regularity of

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"A man cannot say 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness."—SHELLEY *A Defence of Poetry*

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

What time the persons of these ossuaries  
entered the famous nations of the dead  
and slept with princes and counsellors  
might admit a wide solution,<sup>1</sup>

gives place to the studied and continuous regularity of

Herself was seated in an inner room  
Whom sweetly sing he heard, and at her loom  
About a curious web, whose yarn she threw  
In with a golden shuttle;<sup>2</sup>

which can easily degenerate into something neither verse  
nor prose nor poetry, like those memorable lines of Arthur  
Hugh Clough:

Had miscellaneous large experience had  
Of human acts, good, half and half, and bad <sup>3</sup>

Partly it is in the actual vocabulary—so that there really is  
some truth in the remark that “blue violets is prose and  
violets blue is poetry.” Partly also it is in the emotional  
pitch. That debatable No Man’s Land between them—  
prose-poetry, free verse, poetic prose—depends on the  
emotional ‘tension. Raised to a certain pitch, prose turns  
gradually and scarcely noticeably into poetry. Paragraphs of  
Jeremy Taylor, Browne, Bossuet, fill the mind with the same  
indescribable thrill of emotion as a sonnet of Shakespeare.  
The famous speech of Agathon, or Renan’s Prayer on the  
Apocalypse, belong to the same order of poetry as *Paradise  
Lost* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Several passages in the Bible  
are poetry: several passages in *Enoch Arden*, or *Aurora Leigh*,

<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia*, v

<sup>2</sup> Chapman’s *Odyssey*, v

<sup>3</sup> *Mari Magno*, 46, 47

## On the Writing of Verse

or the *Everlasting Mercy* are merely verse, or prose with a regular beat.<sup>1</sup>

These remarks can be illustrated from the following

The sun climbs the heavens above the eastward hill, goes regally overhead, and slopes to his setting beyond the plain. You mark the shadows shorten and lengthen as they steal round the trees. A thrush sings ceaselessly through the morning from a beech-tree on the other side of the lane, falls silent during the heat of the afternoon, and begins again as the shadows lengthen and a cool wind comes out of the west. Overhead the swifts are hawking in the high air for their evening meal. Presently they descend and chase each other over the orchard with the curious sound of an indrawn whistle that belongs to the symphony of late summer evenings. You are pleasantly conscious of these pleasant things as you swing to the measured beat of the scythe, and your thoughts play lightly with kindred fancies, snatches of old song legends of long ago, Ruth in the fields of Boaz, and Horace on his Sabine farm, the sonorous imagery of Israel linking up the waving grasses with the life of man and the scythe with the reaper of a more august harvest. The plain darkens, and the last sounds of day fall on the ear, the distant bark of a dog, the lowing of cattle in the valley, the intimate gurglings of the thrush settling for the night in the nest, the drone of a winged beetle blundering through the dusk, one final note of the white-throat. There is still light for this last slope to the paddock. Swish—swish—swish.—ALPHA OF THE PLOUGH, *On Mowing*

This is pure poetry: it is a poetic idea contained in a prose form. Essentially there is no difference between this piece of prose and the poem I quote below, except a difference of form. In the following lines, the limitations of form have forced the writer to compress, to crystallize, to rarefy

<sup>1</sup> "The preface to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is verse, but it is not poetry. The body of the work is poetry, but it is not verse."—SAMUEL BUTLER.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

the same idea out of a medley of confused sights and impressions to the dominant idea of *sound*

### MOWING

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground  
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself,  
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,  
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—  
And that was why it whispered and did not speak,  
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf,  
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak  
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,  
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers  
(Pale orchises) and scared a bright green snake,  
The fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows  
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make

R FROST

It is with form alone and not content that we deal in the teaching of verse, for verse properly is only prose in a metrical pattern. Poetry cannot be taught; and the Invocation to that once popular poem the *Course of Time* is a tragic confession of incompetence:

Hold my right hand, Almighty! And me teach  
To strike the lyre

All men are poets so long as they remain children: and poetry is a more primitive art than prose. Paradoxically enough, it is therefore all the easier to teach.

### 3. METRE

The first lesson to be learnt in the writing of verse is an appreciation of metre. It is remarkable how many there are

## On the Writing of Verse

who cannot recognize a metre—who cannot with any certainty tell how many beats there are to a given line. For an appreciation of metre would seem to be born in every child, and often enough to be lost as he grows older

Metre is something separate and distinct from rhythm, it is a wholly arbitrary and theoretical division, like a musical bar. It is the regular recurrence of stresses and beats, strong or weak in a line. It is allied to rhyme in that it pleases the ear by reiteration, by a sort of musical echo. Every baby loves a rattle and older babies the tramp of marching soldiers, or the rhythmic beat of a drum, or the metre of a Jazz dance. And yet, when children first begin to write verse, they will either produce *vers libre*, full of erratic rhyme and completely devoid of metre, or will begin with a ballad refrain and end by overflowing into such a jumble of syllables that one is tempted to exclaim with Macbeth "What, will the line stretch out till the crack of doom?" The metre depends on stress, and the stress largely depends on the individual. It is a mistake, I think, to speak of Shakespeare's line as "decasyllabic," or the metre of *L. Allegro* as octosyllabic. Strictly they are nothing of the kind. The first line of Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide is a hendecasyllabic, and yet a perfectly regular blank verse line. They should be referred to as lines of five beats (pentameters), or lines of four beats (tetrameters). The first line of *Cargoes*

Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir

seems to me to be a tetrameter. The accent of the reader falls naturally on four stressed syllables. But it might equally correctly be scanned as a line of eight, though this would destroy the one quality which the verse possesses, the roystering, heady metre of a German drinking song. Scansion is an



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

amusing game, but it matters no more than the date of Shakespeare's birth, or the names of the Five Members. What does matter is that, in learning to write verse, the pupil should become so well acquainted with metre that he will not only be able to recognize the beats in any given line but move with perfect ease among rhythms of his own composition. Anyone who can recognize the regular ballad metre (4, 3, 4, 3) can distinguish also lines of five beats. In that exquisite song *Tears*, from Dowland's *Book of Songs* (1603), the verses end thus.

Rest you then rest, sad eyes!  
Melt not in weeping,  
While she lies sleeping,  
Softly now, softly lies  
Sleeping

The first line is marked by three beats, the next three by two, and the last by one. But the subtleties and variations of the metre would begin to appear if we set this to music. Then, in the first line, the strong beats would fall on "rest":

Rest you then rest, sad eyes!

Anyone can see the number of beats in "A train-band captain eke was he," or "Whence all but he had fled," but the "stretchèd metre of an antique song" changes its pace. A poem often owes half its beauty to this change of pace—this rush and sweep and fall of music. The beauty of the song I quoted lies in the last magnificent monometer, the falling close. But if we took:

Where the narrowing Symplegades whitened the straits of  
Propontis with spray,

## On the Writing of Verse

we find at least two distinct ways of scanning

u u - | <sup>u</sup> u - | u u - | u u - | u u - | u u - |

an anapaestic hexameter, with a slur on "narrowing," or as an anapaestic heptameter

Where the narrowing Symplegades || whitened the straits of  
Propontis with spray

In the second instance we find that the first half of the line moves rapidly, reaching the crest of a wave of rhythm in the last syllable of *Symplegades*, and then suddenly slows down, till it seems to stop altogether with the word "spray." Obviously an anapaestic line is rapid where a trochaic line is heavy and slow. But that is only the beginning of metre. Lines change, verses change, becoming quicker or slower as the mood alters. If we take the second verse of Tennyson's *A Spirit haunts the Year's Last Hours*, we find this modulation of metre very beautifully illustrated.

The air is damp and hushed and close,  
As a sick man's room when he taketh repose  
    An hour before death  
My very heart faints and my whole soul grieves  
At the moist rich smell of the rotting leaves,  
    And the breath  
Of the fading edges of box beneath  
    And the year's last rose.

Heavily hangs the broad sunflower  
Over its grave in the earth so chilly  
Heavily hangs the hollyhock,  
Heavily hangs the tiger-lily

The metre is iambic with variations. Those variations

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

heighten the impression of sickness and decay, given by the words chosen, the *mots justes*. The poem starts at a slow speed, four iambs, and slows to a stop in the third line, so that one seems to hear throughout, in the halt and surge of rhythm, the irregular breathing of a dying man. Then emotion increases, a new impetus is given to the mood, and the metre quickens in the fourth and fifth lines, thereafter to sink gradually to the close.

### 4. RHYME

An appreciation of metre is the first essential. Rhyme is much easier and less important. Metre is a part of rhythm—of the *music* of the verse—rhyme is only an adjunct, though I think a very important adjunct. For again it is an elemental delight and instinct, the love of echo. It is rare that a person, with a little practice, cannot distinguish pure from faulty rhymes—cannot see, for example, that “never” is not a rhyme to “whether.” Rhyming is an amusing game, and few things are more useful as a mere intellectual exercise than the invention of impromptu couplets:

For me a rhyme I never fash—  
I rhyme for fun

The mental gymnastics of Edith Sitwell, W. S. Gilbert, and Calverley afford excellent examples

### 5. POMPOSITIVITY AND SIMPLICITY

The rules that apply to the writing of prose apply also to the writing of verse. Simplicity is a better model than pomposity, sincerity is a quality without which no art is of value. Petronius was not the only one afflicted with the desire for “elegance”.

## On the Writing of Verse

But even here, Eumolpus returning to his old humour 'Young men, began he, "this Poetry deceives many for not only every one that is able to give a verse its numbers, and spin out his feeble sence in a long train of words, has the Vanity to think himself inspir'd but Pleaders at the Bar, when they would give themselves a loose from business, apply themselves to Poetry, as an Entertainment without trouble believing it easier to compile a Poem than maintaine a Controversie, adorn'd with a few florid Sentences. But neither will a generous Spirit affect the empty sound of words nor can a mind, unless enriched with Learning be delivered of a birth of Poetry there must be the purity of language, no Porterly expressions, or meanness, as I may call it, of words is to be admitted but a stile perfectly above the common.—*Satyricon*, II, trs. BURNABY

Clarity and simplicity do not abhor porterly expressions, and the Grand Style of the Eighteenth Century has disappeared, perhaps for good. Every man conversant with verse-writing knows, says Cowper,

and knows by painful experience, that the familiar style is of all styles the most difficult to succeed in. To make verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic—to marshall the words of it in such an order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extempore speaker, yet without meanness, harmoniously elegantly and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake.—*Letter to William Unwin*, 1782.

Yet the *Loss of the Royal George*, the *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*, and *How Sleep the Brave?* are elegies in their own genres as grand as *Lycidas*

### 6. WORD ASSOCIATION

When boys write poetry, it is the romantic models which they imitate. It is naturally the colour and exuberance of

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Swinburne or Keats that appeals to them. And it is just this type of poetry—the type which encourages the faults of vagueness, diffuseness, and rhetoric—which is best for youth. A boy has a limited vocabulary, and when he writes is far more likely to become barren than to become over-gorgeous. Up to a certain point it is better to be too flowery than to be so simple as to become childish. and Tennyson, with all his adjectives, is a better model for a boy than Wordsworth. Twilight, stars, blue mists, and the sea are fatal traps. Any poem containing these words (or adjectives like “glimmering,” “dusky”) must gain a certain facile and tawdry splendour merely because of the romantic associations of the words. We write.

Stealthily now the shadows creep  
Over the twilit lawns of Sleep,  
Folding her petals one by one,  
Fades the last crimson of the sun,

and inevitably the lines make a meretricious appeal. One cannot help reacting to the associations of such words as “shadow,” “twilit,” “lawns,” “sleep,” “petals,” and “crimson.” It has been done once perfectly in Walter de la Mare’s *Nod*—but even the beauty of that has always seemed to me very faintly tinged with the atmosphere of the picture postcard.

### 7. VERB AND ADJECTIVE

The chief value of verse writing as an exercise is that it forces one to crystallize impressions into a rigid mould. that it makes one think in ordered sequence. “Conception, my boy, FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK,” said Rossetti to Hall Caine, “that’s what makes the difference in all art.” It renders

## On the Writing of Verse

the vocabulary flexible and copious. It is not long before one learns how the verb and the adjective add to expression, the value of synonyms, the importance of the choice of words. The adjective or verb misapplied is worse in poetry than in prose. Thomas Gray talks of "warm Charity, and Melancholy's "leaden eye.

The verse adorn again,  
Fierce war and faithful love  
And Truth severe by fairy Fiction drest.  
In buskin'd measures move  
Pale Grief and pleasing Pain  
With Horror tyrant of the throbbing breast

—lines that invariable fill me with a vague distress. Gray is a badly overrated poet. I sometimes doubt whether he was anything more than a rhetorician, and whether the first *few verses of the Elegy* were not his only sincere production. Indeed, the whole of the *Bard* strikes me as almost comic, like Cowper's unfortunate poems on the noble savage. The spectacle of the hoary poet, clad in theatrical garments and delivering a long address to Edward before plunging into Old Conway's foaming flood, is more than a little ridiculous. That is the adjective misapplied—the colourless adjective, adding nothing. "Verdurous green" is not only redundant but meaningless to a modern mind. But lines like

Far far around shall those dark-crested trees  
Fledge the wild-ridg'd mountains steep by steep,<sup>1</sup>

or

And the great goblin moth who bears  
Between his wings the ruined eyes of Death,<sup>2</sup>

---

Keats.

Lord de Tabley

## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

or

Dazzling dark-blue and verdurous, quiet with snow,  
Empty with loveliness, with music a-roar,<sup>1</sup>

call up all the associations of their adjectives. In the last there are few words that could be substituted for verdurous.

Worse perhaps than the colourless adjective is the too unrestrained use of colour. I remember some lines by Oscar Wilde:

The blue-green bean-fields, yonder, tremulous  
With the last shower, a sweeter perfume bring  
Through the cool evening than the odorous  
Flame-jewelled censers the young deacons swing  
When the grey priest unlocks the curtained shrine.

In such descriptive writings the adjective is a fatal trap. Ill-chosen, it reveals the minor poet. well-chosen, it creates unforgettable things—"the sad spaces of oblivion," "wavering limbs borne on the wind-like stream":

But man, proud man,  
Drest in a little brief authority,  
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,  
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven  
As make the angels weep

Sincerity of emotion cannot be taught. With that, rhetoric and tawdriness disappear: when that is learnt the rest is sheer creative delight:

Things won are done—joy's soul lies in the doing

But the search for the *mot juste* may end in the choice of the *outré* word, chosen only for its newness or "origin-

<sup>1</sup> De la Mare

## On the Writing of Verse

ality" In an effort to avoid the cliché, a worse crime will be committed and result at best in the amusing audacities of Edith Sitwell. The worship of the ugly or the unexpected is only a reaction against the post Tennysonian worship of prettiness. The Victorian might describe hills of primroses as star-clustered with their lovely lights. The modern would retort

hills!  
leprous with primroses.

After all,

I think we are in rat s alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones,

is only a logical reaction to

God s in his heaven—  
All s right with the world!

### 8. NONSENSE VERSE

There are hundreds of different forms of verse to be experimented with one should only attempt the writing of true verse after having learnt the lessons of simplicity and sincerity. The first stage is to enjoy playing with rhyme and experimenting with metre, till one comes at length to drop into poetry with something of the genial facility of Mr Wegg. And for this purpose few types of verse are better than Nonsense Rhymes.

Except for some of the more hieratic remarks of Gertrude Stein and the delightful poem of Samuel Foote on the *Panyandrum*, there is no such thing as pure nonsense in literature. Nonsense in poetry has a queer logic of its own. The author begins with a magnificently incredible postulate, and from it, logically and inevitably, develop the subsequent



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

events. Once the Pobble has been accepted as a fact, it seems no longer strange that he should swim the Channel, or be in charge of an eccentric Aunt, or even that he should suffer his unhappy fate. And this style of nonsense comes naturally to children, who can accept Hansel and Gretel as Facts—in a world of their own. There are rules in Nonsense Verse, but they are rules made in another world. Once that world has been entered, the Gromboolian Plain is as clearly marked on that mythical atlas as the Sahara is marked on a map of Africa. The passage which Alice descends after the White Rabbit is as real as the gulfs Dante descends after Virgil.

We take Edward Lear as our model—the greatest of all Nonsense poets. First comes the choice of a Subject, a mythical Beast: let us say a MUNGLE. Then we enter the land of nonsense and create a background—the island on the edge of the world, inhabited by incredible animals. And finally there comes the invention of the Legend of the Mungle, as there is a legend of the Pobble, or the Owl and the Pussy Cat. The legend must be both short and simple. We make the Mungle a strange kind of bird, picturing all the small Mungles dwelling in the boughs of the Pong Tree. Long ago, so the legend might run, the Mother Mungle flew out over the Desolate Ocean, promising on her return to teach her brood how to fly. Unhappily, she dropped her umbrella in the waves of the ocean, and dived down to get it: and there she remains to this day searching for it, while the little birds in the Pong Tree watch for her return.

That idea seems adequately simple. The rhyme scheme, the metre, and the construction are perhaps more important. For a Nonsense Rhyme depends for its effect chiefly on two things—on its music and its imaginative colour. Surely the most memorable things in Lear are this picture

## *On the Writing of Verse*

When awful darkness and silence reign  
Over the great Gromboolian Plain,  
Through the long, long wintry nights —  
When the angry breakers roar  
As they beat on the rocky shore —  
When storm-clouds brood on the towering heights  
Of the Hills on the Chankly Bore,

and this music

Far and few, far and few  
Are the lands where the Jumblies live,  
Their heads are green and their hands are blue,  
And they went to sea in a sieve.

The metrical scheme must be simple and musical, the picture clear, we should begin with the description of the birds left behind in the Pong Trees

In the blood red fruit of the Pong  
By the caves of the Grundlibee,  
Live the yellow-eyed Mungles, and all day long  
On the topmost boughs of the tree,  
All day long they chirrup this song,  
"How exceedingly happy we'd be,  
We d be,  
How exceedingly happy we d be,  
If night and day we could frolic and play  
On the sands by the Desolate Sea!"

The picture is then heightened and emphasized by colour

From each crimson husk, like a star  
In the dusk of a dim green night,  
Over the ocean they gaze afar  
And waggle their wings for flight—  
They peer afar, and they pray that Ma  
Once more on the Isle may alight,  
Alight,  
Once more on the Isle may alight,  
Or appear like a star where the Wolloponga are  
And the seas are edged with white.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Then the explanation begins in the third verse, and should describe how the mother bird flapped away, but had forgotten to teach them to fly.

So the tiny things with the useless wings  
Out of the Pong Trees cry . . .

But of course in vain.

For reply comes nil, and the Mungle will  
Flap out of the skies no more;  
For she's found a home down under the foam,  
Where the snow-lit breakers roar

Then, finally, a verse explaining what happened to the Mungle: how she dived under the sea, searching for the lost umbrella. and in the final verse a return to the melancholy brood, left deserted:

And home once more to the hollow shore  
She will never return again,  
Again,  
She will never return again,  
Where the little birds cry in the Pong Trees high,  
She will never return again.

The beauty of the Nonsense Verse is its irresponsibility. The license of the poet is added to the license of the lunatic. By the mere invention of new words it can pad out a line. No one need be gruelled for lack of a rhyme. To rhyme with tree there is the sonorous mystery of the Grundlibee, if we want a dactyl to help out a line, no one asks questions about the Wollopongs. The mere accumulation of curious names is effective, if no explanation is added.

## *On the Writing of Verse*

Bright black hoofs go flashing on the sea-line,  
Hunger shining in the wild white eye  
And when he sees a Wangle or a Crump he makes a  
bee-line  
Uttering a joyful cry —

I

Spy a little Crump or a Wangle or a Quimble  
Lurking in the dingle where the Pong Trees grow  
And Prabbles all a-galloping ravenous and nimble,  
Tapping in the dark woods go "

The mere fact that no one knows what a Wangle Woo  
looks like adds a certain sinister colour to the line:

Upon the slippery rocks in twos  
Dangling hang the Wangle Woods.

No, it is not very difficult to write nonsense.

### 9 TRANSLATION

If Nonsense Poetry teaches a delight in rhyme, colour, and music, nothing more effectively teaches the quality of restraint than practice in translation into verse. Translation into English verse should be made a regular task in the teaching of Latin. To ask a translation of Virgil into prose is to invite a piece of English either as humdrum as a lawyer's letter or as pompous and affected as the discourse of Dr Grimstone. The only way to teach the fact that Virgil wrote poetry is to insist that he be translated into poetry. Here is no opportunity given for indulgence in strange rhymes and rhythms. Not only the theme, but the treatment is already laid down. 'The life-blood of a rhythmical translation is this commandment—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one. Poetry not being an exact science, literalness of rendering is altogether secondary to this chief law. I say

## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

*literality*—not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing.”<sup>1</sup>

Horace’s *Ode to Leuconoe* (I. xi) is short, simple—and therefore incredibly hard to translate. The measure we should choose might be octosyllabic.

Ask no more, ’tis wrong to know  
What term of life the gods bestow .

which gives the sense of the Latin, but nothing of the haunting and exquisite melody of its spirit. We come soon to a phrase like *nec Babylonios tentaris numeros Numeros*—the “tablets” of the Babylonians: or perhaps the “horoscope.”

Shun  
The runic dreams of Babylon

we write—and are straightway miles removed from the strength and simplicity of Horace our runic dreams are not only ornate and inappropriate, but no translation of the original. The best phrases are the hardest to render, and

or this the last  
Which tireless escalades again  
the cliff-walls of the Tuscan main,

or

E’en as we gossip, you and I,  
Envious time goes racing by,

only dress up the simple thought in over-gorgeous language. If there is to be any practice in the translation of poetry, the capture of the spirit—which helps towards appreciation—is infinitely more important than the mere capture of the

<sup>1</sup> D G Rossetti, *Early Italian Poets*, Preface.

## On the Writing of Verse

meaning—which only helps towards the passing of examinations. Van Gogh's "transcription" of the *Sower* is far closer to Millet than any copy could hope to be and Chapman, with all his faults, is nearer Homer than the languid but accurate prose of Andrew Lang. The best translation of *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, et amemus* is Herrick's *Song to Mirth*. Indeed, most of the best translations, like the *Rubdydt* or *Heracleitus*, might better be called "Meditations after reading an old Poet" suggested in the same way as *Kubla Khan* was suggested by Purchas, or the *Ancient Mariner* by Shelvocke's disconsolate black *Albatross*,<sup>1</sup> or *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy* by an anonymous fifteenth-century poem.

### 10. PARODY

Translation is a grim and stern enough test. No less hard, though perhaps rather more amusing, is the invention of epigrams, epitaphs, potted biographies, and the hundreds of complicated verse-forms from the triolet to the Rhymrhumballade. These are exercises very much more advanced. The epigram depends upon an idea the potted biography on a rhyme, and the difficulty begins when the idea is made to fit into rhyme, or when the rhyme is hammered round an idea. In all these three forms of verse, brevity is the essential quality the verse must state its meaning simply and clearly without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme."

But of all exercises in the game, the art of Parody I would call the most valuable, because it teaches something rarer than mere mastery of technique. It teaches appreciation, the aim of all study. By finding the joints in the harness

*Voyage Round the World by Way of the Great South Sea, 1726.*

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

one finds, too, its strength, but by seeking for the weakness one comes upon the beauty . . .

Parody is the art of caricature in writing. It is the best approach to appreciation because, before he does anything, the true parodist must know his victim intimately. The caricature of style and spirit is true parody—the subtlest form of criticism. The verbal parody is the caricature of matter rather than manner—a Skit. True parody exposes the worthless, but also reveals the good. Unless it does this it is a desecration. William Maginn, the drunken Irishman who made fun out of the loveliness of *Adonais*, hits on the pseudo-archaism, the repetition, and the simplicity of the *Ancient Mariner* with better taste:

“The waine is fulle, the horses pulle,  
Merrilye did we trotte,  
Alonge the bridge, alonge the road,  
A jolly crewe, I wotte”  
And here the tailore smotte his breaste,  
He smelte the cabbage pottle!

The night was darke—like Noah’s arke,  
Oure waggone moved along,  
The haile poured faste, loude roared the blaste,  
Yet still we moved alonge,  
And sung in chorus “Cease, loud Borus,”  
A very charming songe

But Calverley’s verses in imitation of Browning are a skit, catching only the manner. Mere imitation is easy enough. The skit takes a well-known or hackneyed poem, and, while keeping as closely as possible to the rhythm and words of the original, alters the meaning to the ludicrous. This form of verbal parody is a matter of ingenuity in transforming the dignified to the ridiculous. Dryden writes:

## On the Writing of Verse

So two kind turtles, when a storm is nigh,  
Look up and see it gathering in the sky  
Each calls his mate to shelter in the Groves,  
Leaving in murmur their unfinish'd Loves.  
Perch'd on some drooping Branch they sit alone,  
And Cooe, and hearken to each other's moan.

*Conquest of Granada, II i, Sc. ii*

Villiers writes a verbal parody of it in the *Rehearsal*

So Boar and Sow when any storm is nigh,  
Snuff up, and smell it gathering in the Skie  
Boar beckons Sow to trot in Chesnut Groves,  
And there consummate their unfinish'd Loves.  
Pensive in mud they wallow all alone,  
And snort, and gruntle to each other's moan.

*Rehearsal, I. I.*

But true parody takes no particular poem it takes the style and spirit of the author, which appear in all his writings, and throws into strong relief their faults and weaknesses. Thus all the peculiar characteristics and mannerisms of Yeats are revealed in

Of an old king in a story  
From the grey sea folk I have heard  
Whose heart was no more broken  
Than the wings of a bird.

and of Swinburne in

In the time of old sin without sadness  
And golden with wastage of gold,  
Like the gods that grow old in their gladness,  
Was the king that was glad, growing old:  
And with sound of loud lyres from his palace  
The voice of the oracles spoke,  
And the lips that were red from his chalice  
Were splendid with smoke.<sup>1</sup>

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*Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton (Palmer), pp. 38, 40.*



## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

Parody is a high art. Maselield is only partly present in

From '81 to '84  
I played with putty on the floor,  
I left the kitchen taps to run,  
I turned the passage gases on,  
My dad 'e made a precious row  
O Lord, I am so sorry now

S. D. CHARLES

This parodies the *Everlasting Mercy*, as "See an old, unhappy snail" so instantly parodies the *Bull*. But only half of Maselield's style is caught. The Celtic twilight yearning for the "Ineffable *Something*," which is so characteristic of the poet, is completely absent.

The Skit is a more amusing game than the true parody—chiefly because it is easier. The poems in *Alice in Wonderland* are all skits rather than parodies, and Lewis Carroll has observed the rule that no poem should be parodied unless it is first disliked. I do not think anything can spoil a really great poem. I do not think even E. V. Lucas's brilliant skit on the *Ode to the Nightingale* (*Keats in Babbit Land*) has marred at all for me the original. But a skit may very easily spoil a poem not in the very front rank. Poe's *Ulalume* has always been ruined for me by that skit of Bret Harte's:

But Mary, uplifting her finger,  
Said, "Sadly this bar I mistrust—  
I fear that this bar does not trust  
Oh, hasten! Oh, let us not linger!  
Oh, fly—let us fly—ere we must!"  
In agony sobbed, letting sink her  
Parasol till it trailed in the dust,  
Till it sorrowfully trailed in the dust

But a skit on a hackneyed poem, or on a poem one unreason-

## On the Writing of Verse

ingly dislikes—as I dislike the *Charge of the Light Brigade*, or *T. E. Brown's Garden*, or *Going Downhill on a Bicycle*—is not only great fun, but a very searching and difficult test. Here, again, rigid limits are enforced as in Translation: the new meaning must be given by the merest twist. Exaggeration, or a too violent departure from the original will ruin all.

## X

### ON READING BOOKS

"In omnibus requiem quaesivi, et nusquam inveni nisi in angulo cum libro"—DE BURY

I CANNOT recall very many of the remarks made to me by my schoolmasters, but I remember one "I do not think," said the man who once taught me English, "that there is anything else in the world quite so important as Reading" I have never forgotten that, and, sweeping though it is, I cannot even now persuade myself that it is wholly false

Shenstone divided the world up into "men that read, men that write, men that think, and Foxhunters" He might well have divided it only into men that read and men that do not read For the true reader is a thinker, and something also of a creative artist, in another medium The love of reading is "the first and last, the most home-felt, the most heart-felt of all our enjoyments,"<sup>1</sup> and I would say without hesitation that a man who is not a reader in the best sense of the word is a man living in a two-dimensional world, blind to half the things that make life worth the living I would affirm with even less hesitation that once anyone has been taught to become a reader, so far as his teachers are concerned, his education is finished: for it will continue of its own impetus And you may teach him all the languages in the world and all the sciences, and without taste and without a love of literature he will stay a Philistine to the grave.

<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt

I have known men who look on books with genuine hatred, and on the readers of them with genuine contempt. To them books are dead things, crammed with forgotten sayings and useless wisdom. "What a place to be in is an old library!" says Lamb, and by such people his remark would be echoed with a very different intonation. Burton complains of the type savagely enough

The major part (and some again excepted, that are indifferent) are wholly bent for hawks and hounds. If they read a book at any time (*si quid est interm otu a venatu, poculis alea, scortis*) tis an English Chronicle, St. Huon of Bordeaux, Amadis de Gaul, etc., a playbook, or some pamphlet of news, and that at such seasons only when they cannot stir abroad to drive away time.<sup>1</sup>

There were Philistines also in his day, as there are in ours—men to whom the reading of a book is like an intellectual round of golf, a pleasure without any physical benefit. Shelley expressed his feelings more emphatically than Burton when he sat down suddenly on the floor of a crowded stage coach and recited in ringing tones

For God's sake let us sit upon the ground,  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings!

If a book is a dead thing, it had much better be treated as a dead thing—and put behind glass on dignified, undusted shelves. It is the business of making books alive and lovable through the personalities of their authors which is one of the few excuses of the schoolmaster. Once a book has become alive, it has become also an integral part of the reader and if it fails to add to experience or delight it is better left unread. Reading means living imaginatively with the noblest

*Anatomy of Melancholy* Part I. ii.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

relics of the past, sharing the thoughts and the wisdom of the greatest men the world has produced in three thousand years. It offers a wider vision. It offers examples of high experience. It reveals something of the miracle of mere existence. And a man is blind to the miracle of himself and his surroundings if he is blind to the books that teach it. To say that one has "no time for reading" is to turn it into a mere ornamental accessory to existence. It is like saying one has not the time to listen to advice. It is like saying one has not the time for God.

That is not to deny that reading is a serious labour. Everyone reads, in the sense that they scan newspaper columns and enjoy detective stories. But true reading is an educative process, and is as hard, and requires as much practice as the writing or reading of Latin.<sup>1</sup> The English Benedictines of the eleventh century treated reading almost as a religious exercise, and if a brother had taken out a book from the library and had failed to read it through, he was expected to fall on his face and confess his crime and beg forgiveness of the librarian. True reading is certainly one of the main pathways to taste, to appreciation, and taste needs as much education as art or music. We work hard for years before we fully appreciate *Jan Arnolfini*, or Crome's *Moonrise on the Yare*. We labour to love Shakespeare, and we win our appreciation of the *Symphony in C* by sweat and suffering. And yet we call ourselves readers, and pretend to a love of hundreds of books and hundreds of beautiful

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it has often struck me that the real value of teaching the reading of Latin and Greek is that it helps to teach the reading of English. A study of the Classics trains one to master the full meaning of every phrase and sentence, and never to pass on to the next page before the last ounce of that meaning has been extracted. You will never find a classical scholar who is a slipshod reader of English.

## *On Reading Books*

things which secretly bore us. We pretend to appreciate beauty but beauty must be wooed long, for it is the most bashful of the naiads. To the huge majority Shakespeare is not so interesting as "Sapper, nor is Fielding more absorbing than John Buchan. That is very natural, since Sapper and John Buchan appeal to our contemporaries as Shakespeare and Fielding appealed to theirs. It is curious that the quality which makes Sapper readable to-day is just the quality which will make him unreadable to-morrow and those things that made Shakespeare a popular playwright four hundred years ago are just those things that make him a less popular writer to-day. The things which endure are deeply buried. And it is only by an arduous apprenticeship to great men that appreciation can be won. If a thing is done with no trouble, it is not worth the doing, and no great work of art yields its secret to the lazy. The reader has to work hard to gain his reward—"Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath. But the reward is the secret of living.

I do not think that the art of reading is dead, any more than that the art of letter writing is dead. Those complaints are made in every age, and two hundred years ago Walpole was writing "What a pity it is that I was not born in the golden age of Louis the Fourteenth, when it was not only the fashion to write folios, but to read them too!

I would not insist on the moral or intellectual advantages of reading. "Why is there more merit, says Walpole again, "in having travelled one's eyes over so many reams of paper than in having carried one's legs over so many acres of ground?" It is the mere delight of reading, which is equalled, I think, by nothing else in the world. And whether it is only sentimentality, or whether there really is a sort of occult and irrecoverable magic about childhood I do not know—but

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

it has always seemed to me that the first books one reads are the most important. I can believe it true that a man's outlook on life may be fixed by his early reading and that one who has been brought up with no knowledge of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Robinson Crusoe* will lack something all his days, however often and with whatever enthusiasm he may read them later. I cannot tell why it is that I do not enjoy *Madame Bovary*, or *Kipps*, or *Vanity Fair* with quite the same intensity as I enjoy *Martin Chuzzlewit* or *Peregrine Pickle*, unless it be for this reason—unless it be that whenever I hear of Sarah Gamp, or think of Hatchway and Pipes, I am taken back suddenly and completely into the conditions in which I first read of their adventures, to an old library full of sunshine and the smell of leather, and to a state of mind with no relation to past or future. Or perhaps it is contrast—the secret of the perennial charm of the picaresque. The secret of those books which are loved (like *Lavengro*) rather than worshipped as artistic wholes (like *Anna Karenina*) is the human love of rest after labour. One of the greatest pleasures in life is a good dinner after a laborious day. One of the greatest pleasures in literature is following a character through the stress and turmoil of adventure to see him safely housed at last. The noblest story in the world is the story of the wanderings of Ulysses—because he gets to Ithaca. And whenever I open *Pickwick*, I find the same group about the fireside, telling anecdotes of the strenuous day: of the Eatanswill Election, or the supper at Bob Sawyer's, or the cricket match between All Muggleton and Dingley Dell. They come back at last and it is the home-coming one waits for—to the estate at Lirias, where Gil Blas and Scipio can talk over their shady adventures, to the garrison of Pipes and Hatchway, to the little hovel on

## On Reading Books

Hampstead Heath, or to the arms of the adorable Sophia. It is the supreme moment—the moment when pipes are lit and toils forgotten, and the punchbowl passes on its round.

Teach me so to study other men's works as not to neglect my own. Take me off from the curiosity of knowing only to know and from the folly of pretending to know more than I do know.

Write this in my heart, and I shall be the best book in my library.—SIR RICHARD WALLER.

Idle reading, solely to pass the time, is something akin to a vice: serious reading which is not a labour of love, and a love as well as a labour, is a waste of time. It matters little whether one's taste be for Kant or Kipling, provided that reading is an integral part of existence, and not a mere pleasure or a mere drug. The reader will easily enough be able to divide his life by the books he has read. Some books blow up one's mental outlook like a silent explosion. Who can forget his first reading of Gibbon, or Fielding, or George Borrow?

Before we begin to read we buy a library. Everyone ought to start a library of his own, whether he read it or not. There is a particular type of man who has his shelves full of books which have never been opened. That is a form of hypocrisy rare in children, and not very harmful. In a grown man it is contemptible and rather amusing. Barclay has drawn the character

I am the firste foole of all the hole navy  
To kepe the pompe, the helme and eke the sayle  
For this is my mynde, this one pleasoure have I  
Of booke to have grete plenty and aparayle.  
I take no wysdome by them, nor yet awayle,  
Nor them perceyve nat, and then I them despyse  
Thus am I a foole, and all that sewe that guise.

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Barclay's *Shippe of Foles* I i (Pynson's ed., 1509)



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

The Book-fool spends his time building a library he never uses, solely for the purpose of impressing others with his show of knowledge.

But if it fortune that any lernyd men  
Within my house fall to disputacioun,  
I drawe the curtyns to shewe my bokes then,  
That they of my cunnyng sholde make probacioun.

That form of intellectual snobbery is not a common failing of extreme youth. But the mere fact of seeing books around them—the mere knowledge of possession will induce a child to read. At the age of about ten my own library consisted of some forty volumes. Half of them were leather-bound tracts, histories of Arabia, dissertations on the Bible, and the only one I still possess is a magnificent edition of Jeremy Taylor. This I opened for the first time when I was nineteen. None of the others were ever read. I bought them simply because they were books. Yet I am convinced that, even though I never looked inside them, it was the mere presence of books that really formed in me a love of reading.

For a library is above all a friendly place—or should be. As far as I can remember, the library at school was a hallowed spot, open for half an hour every Sunday morning. It wore a halo of dignity; it was austere and frigid. A library ought to be open as often as a church; and, like a church, it should retain something of respect. "And in the first place, as to the opening and shutting of books, let there be due moderation, that they be not unclasped in precipitate haste, nor when we have finished our inspection be put away without being duly closed. For it behoves us to guard a book much more carefully than a boot."<sup>1</sup> Some books rather gain by

<sup>1</sup> R. de Bury, *Philobiblon*, xvii

## On Reading Books

being treated as old friends with scant ceremony or politeness. You will seldom find a lover of Shakespeare who would care to read *Hamlet* from any copy but his own—and that probably a bent and battered Globe Edition. I have always felt some suspicion for those people who treat a book with too great reverence. Doctor Johnson was a very great lover of books in the true sense—he was a Book lover rather than a Bibliophile. "There are my friends—there are my books, to which I have not yet bid farewell! But he read during meals (like all true book-lovers), annotated his library, and (if he had no paper knife handy) would very properly cut the pages with his fingers. His books, says Hawkins, were chosen with such scant regard for appearance "as showed they were intended for use, and that he disdained the ostentation of learning." But there are other books that demand a certain reverence in the handling, a certain dignity of binding: I have never been able to gain the greatest pleasure from Milton, or Homer, or the *Arcadia*, unless I read them in folio, and unless that folio was my own. It is

"You may happen to see some headstrong youth lazily lounging over his studies—his nails are stuffed with filthy dirt as black as jet, with which he marks any passage that pleases him. He distributes a multitude of straws, which he inserts to stick out at different places so that the halm may remind him of what his memory cannot retain.

He does not fear to eat fruit or cheese over an open book, or carelessly to carry a cup to and from his mouth—and because he has no wallet at hand, he drops into the books the fragments that are left. Aye, and then hastily folding his arms, he leans forward on the book, and by a brief spell of study invites a prolonged nap—and then, by way of mending the wrinkles, he folds back the margin of the leaves.

"But the handling of books is specially to be forbidden to those shameless youths, who, as soon as they have learned to form the shapes of letters, become unhappy commentators, and whenever they find an extra margin about the text, furnish it with monstrous alphabets. —*Philobiblon*, xvii.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

only when you can look on rows and rows of shining backs, and count them all over and recognize them as old friends, each with their tale of unforbidden experience, that you come at last to love books as men love their fellow-creatures.

It is easy enough, of course, to talk about great books, it is easy enough to rhapsodize glibly over the speeches of Burke, and then to go back to one's library and pull down the next instalment of *The Bloodstained Thumb*. There is a fatal deal of hypocrisy about it all and hypocrisy, as I have pointed out, is not one of the vices of the true reader. The love of great literature is only acquired by the formation of taste, and the forming of taste is something that begins with the schoolboy, or with the child in the cradle, or as far back as you wish.

It is true that the great majority of people pay only lip service to the Classics of their own literature. But then it is also true that the great majority of people are lacking in real taste. It is the rarest of qualities and we seldom take the trouble to recognize that, or to set about the acquiring of it. That is what education is for. An educated man (though, like us all, a slave to mood) will genuinely find greater pleasure in listening to Brahms than to a musical comedy; in reading Shakespeare than in reading Alfred Noyes. But if a man makes a pretence of enjoying Brahms and Shakespeare, and secretly indulges in Edgar Wallace, he is an intellectual snob. And if he is incapable of enjoying musical comedy, minor poetry, and *Strand Magazines*, I feel there must be something lacking in his intellectual equipment. For literature is a universal thing and taste means a catholic appreciation. The really educated mind can enjoy the poems of Oscar Wilde just as it can enjoy the poems of Milton: it can find pleasure in banjos as well as in Beethoven. It can,

## On Reading Books

in short, discover and appreciate what is good in everything. Naturally, therefore, it will enjoy a "Classic. For a Classic does not mean a book that has been called great, and put aside on a shelf and admired distantly and without enthusiasm, as one admires the statues of the Twelve Apostles or the Early Roman Emperors. A Classic means a work that has given, and continues to give, lasting pleasure to men of taste. It is not a book that is dead, it is essentially a book that is perpetually and often violently alive. *Lavengro* and the *Canterbury Tales* are Classics, Rosa Kettle's *Mistress of Langdale Hall* is not a Classic (it is, in fact, dead) That is because *Lavengro* and the *Canterbury Tales* are still to some people the homes of characters more vivid and alive than a roomful of their personal friends they can still create a life more real than the life we live ourselves. All else is worthless besides old Wood to burn, old Wine to drink, old Friends to converse with, and old Books to read," said Alphonso of Arragon. You will notice the adjectives. Time tests the worth of wine and friendship, and it tests also the worth of books. Literature does not mean a mere amusement to pass the time nor does it mean the study of the learned few. It is neither a game nor a secret society, it is an elemental need of life. A man who takes no exercise is a creature one-sided and only half-developed. Reading maketh a full man. It enriches, awakens, widens the horizon, teaches the very difficult and delicate art of living. Some men are blind to half the beauty of the world. A man who goes to his grave knowing nothing of the Symphonies of Beethoven or *Samson Agonistes* is as much asleep as a man who all his life has never noticed a sunset or heard the nightingale. And literature keeps these things alive and significant. It is therefore a living thing, a living study, and it is as a living study

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

that it must be treated. God knows it is easy enough to make it seem as dead as Moses. But—"when I am reading a book, whether wise or silly, it seems to be *alive* and talking to me . . ."<sup>1</sup>

It is the initial step that is so hard to take. How forbidding sounds the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—and what an unforgettable delight the first reading of it! That is perhaps the one legitimate function of the critic, the creation of enthusiasm. There is but one way to create enthusiasm—and that is to feel it yourself. No man can feel sincere appreciation for some beautiful thing without quite unconsciously inspiring others with something of his own enthusiasm. A man never writes as well when he blames as when he praises, even when, behind his attack, burns the white heat of Macaulay. That is why the majority of the greatest passages of criticism in literature are passages of appreciation, and why Hazlitt and his fellows write at their best when they love and admire their subjects. Teacher and taught are on the same level if they can both feel the same enthusiasms.

But reading is a very personal thing. It is only when he reads on his own and at his pleasure that a man learns to read *thoroughly* and gains from books their full enjoyment. "Finally we must consider what pleasantness of teaching there is in books, how easy, how *secret*!"<sup>2</sup> That element of loneliness is inseparable from the true delight of reading. To be read to aloud, to sit in the company of hundreds of others in the reading-room of a great library—that is to miss all the ecstasy of solitude. The curtains drawn, the lamp alight, the flicker of the firelight on the walls . . . Few can look back on the books they have loved reading and find that they first read them in crowded rooms. Then

<sup>1</sup> Swift

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lamb

## On Reading Books

again, the personality of the reader keeps on coming in between the book and the imagination. Some books (Scott, I think) are ruined by being read aloud. Some books lose half their drama or humour by not being read aloud (like Dickens or Mark Twain).

Nothing is ever too small to make a beginning. To start a boy off on Dickens or Thackeray is like giving him whisky and being surprised that he doesn't like it. In the one case you spoil the development of taste in the other you probably spoil the boy. To sneer at someone for reading Edgar Wallace or to praise him for reading Dickens is to make the mistake of dividing literature into watertight compartments—the High, the Middle, and the Low—and to imagine that a reader is a man who is on familiar terms with the collected works of Tolstoy, and refuses even to recognize the existence of Mr Phillips Oppenheim. Even the most exquisite of connoisseurs once enjoyed his ginger beer and no man's education is complete unless he has read *Eni* and wept over Marie Corelli. Genuine enthusiasm should never be checked, even if it happens to be felt for an unworthy object. It should be guided or most tactfully controlled. I know how much I myself have gained from a transitory and juvenile admiration for Jeffery Farnol and William le Queux.

The problem of how far to go in commentary and criticism is a very real one. All readers pass through two stages. When they first begin to read, there is opened up suddenly before them a new, vast, and unexplored region of the imagination. They devour book after book indiscriminately—they are living in other worlds. I do not think they are often actually conscious of gaining pleasure or knowledge from what they read. Books simply come as the fulfilment of an elemental desire: a quite unconscious urge of the imagination

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

—the soul's *Reiselust* But there comes a time inevitably when they realize that a wide knowledge of literature is a social and intellectual asset. Everyone secretly admires the man who can talk about Stravinsky and move with perfect ease among tonal scales and Neapolitan Sixths. Equally, I suppose, everyone feels a certain distant respect for the man who can refer to the early editions of Shakespeare's Plays familiarly as Q<sub>3</sub> or F<sub>2</sub> And it is hard not to be tempted to yield to this implicit flattery If someone happens to call on you, it is difficult not to feel glad that you happen to have Homer on the desk before you, and not the Edgar Wallace you had just been looking at. We are all something akin to Archdeacon Grantly, who kept *Rabelais* in the secret drawer of his writing-table This is, of course, a form of insincerity, and a very common form of it. For every ten people who express admiration for H. D. or T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, only one perhaps is not actuated by an insidious intellectual snobbery. But literary snobbery is a stage that must be passed It takes usually the form of scribbling in margins—"furnishing them with monstrous alphabets," underlining, making lists of books read, and other harmless vanities I still recall with shame the literary snobbery which made me very ostentatiously and laboriously translate the *Historia Anglicana* of Thomas Walsingham, cutting the pages, and writing at the end of it a little inscription stating when I read it. I expect it reposes to this day on those dusky shelves untouched, unless some other intellectual snob has tried thus easily to impress his companions

I have not been advocating that the *Ultima Thule* of education is the turning of everyone into an actual or potential bookworm A bookworm is a person who reads, not for pleasure or profit, but either for the mere blind sake of

## On Reading Books

reading, or more often simply to show off. First and last, the true reader reads for his own exquisite delight and does not greatly care about the improvement of the mind or the training of the intellect. Literary snobbery is the vice of adolescence, and it is fatally easy to encourage it. The easiest way to do so is by misplaced criticism and commentary. Criticism should be discovered, not handed out and then should come the argument and the discussion. It is a temptation in reading, let us say, Chaucer, on coming to the line, "In hope to stonden in his lady grace," to point out the peculiar form of the genitive, to allude to the survivals of old feminines in -an, and to cite "oure lady veyl" as an interesting philological comparison. Or to dismiss those unforgettable autumnal leaves with the remark that the forests of Vallombrosa are entirely composed of pines. After which, with a glow of self satisfaction, we turn again to the poem, ignorant of all the gold dust we have rubbed off it. At the end of the *Lysis*, loveliest of all the Platonic Dialogues, into the realms of divine philosophy enters the dark Genius of Education. Like ill spirits" the Pedagogues approach, and "mutter together in a barbarous dialect." The only real excuse for commentary is the absolute necessity that readers should understand what they read. They seldom do. Certainly if a child learns off by heart and then recites Andrew Lang's *Sonnet on the Odyssey*, the chances are that, when asked to explain it, he will murmur that it is something about a fellow lying on a beach listening to music and the sound of the waves. But a poem or a piece of prose should never be interrupted. It should be read straight through, and then gone over swiftly, extracting the full meaning.

Litel hevynesse

Is right enough for mooste folke I guesse.



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

And the most distressing spectacle in literature is that of the learned and dignified Bentley improving *Paradise Lost*. A solemn and awful warning to all pedagogues. It is only when appreciation withers that emendation begins. "The owl of Minerva does not start upon its flight till the evening shadows begin to fall." The age of the pedagogue is passed. Those "tyrannical, impatient, hair-brain'd school-masters, *aridi magistri*," which roused Burton to such fury, are no more. And Mr. Stelling, I suppose, is an animal now extinct; but the Tom Tullivers exist in their thousands:

One day when he had broken down, for the fifth time, in the supines of the Third Conjugation, Mr. Stelling, convinced that this must be carelessness, since it transcended the bounds of possible stupidity, had lectured him very seriously, pointing out that if he failed to seize the present golden opportunity of learning supines, he would have to regret it when he became a man . . .<sup>1</sup>

And yet Tom was a far keener observer of life than his teacher, though his powers of observation were never brought into harmony with his studies. To read an author in order to pass an examination often kills any desire to read that author at any other time or for any other purpose. It is fortunate that, as a rule, it is the less genial authors who are thus persecuted—Carlyle, Bacon, Milton. For reading an author for an examination means, if he be Bacon, making skeleton outlines of the *Essays*, learning their dates, translating them, and writing paraphrases, knowing off by heart the Latin quotations, recognizing allusions. . . . Such is the reward of fame. and such for generations has been the way in which even the bones of Shakespeare have been desecrated. Until a true appreciation of the atmosphere,

<sup>1</sup> *Mill on the Floss*, II 1

## On Reading Books

humour, and characterization of the plays of Shakespeare is gained, mere critical commentary does not only fail to increase enjoyment, but actually hinders it. No one is aided to a fuller appreciation of the character of Touchstone by a knowledge of what the "book" was by which he quarrelled, or of Falstaff by having heard of Sir John Oldcastle. Once Touchstone and Falstaff have come to be loved, nothing can harm them. A knowledge of sources and influences, allusions and quotations, can add pleasure to the reading of a play, and (after the play is loved for itself) even if they add no pleasure, at least they cannot take any away. It is when such idle and irrelevant information precedes a knowledge and love of the spirit of the work that it is in danger of killing appreciation. I cannot see what advantage—except in cross-word puzzles—it is to anyone to know in this way a play of Shakespeare's. A knowledge of quotations, allusions, and strange words serves no purpose at all but the exercise of the memory, which can be attained equally well by learning off by heart a proposition in geometry, or the first chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes. If Shakespeare must be set for examination purposes, there is no reason why a few general questions should not reveal the essential facts. Such a question as a discussion of the character of Falstaff will show two things. It will show whether the reader has appreciated the play (which is the more important), and any essay on Falstaff must reveal *ignorance or knowledge of Henry the Fourth*.

"Reading maketh a full man," and no one can write a good essay without having read. Intelligent reading is a constant stimulus to thought—a ceaseless supply of fuel for the mind. The writer of English should be equipped with a knowledge of most things under the sun, for the true

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

writer is interested in all things. His brain should be stored with the wisdom of centuries—a wisdom which only a few shelves of his library could contain. There are not many who can afford to neglect the accumulated experience of man

“The profession which I have embraced,” replied Don Quixote, “requires a knowledge of everything”

## XI

### ON POETRY AND APPRECIATION

#### I

POETRY is present in all imaginative utterances, and the chief quality of the poet is his imagination. All men are potential poets for the poet is not an abnormal creature, possessing a rare jewel (or a peculiar complex) denied to the rest of mankind. He only gathers into a shining whole other men's broken shards of beauty. In his ambition and his imaginative dreams, Napoleon was as genuinely a poet as Byron and in the character of Alexander the Great is something of the magnificence of Milton. A poet is a man to whom the familiar has become suddenly strange—a man who notices the little things, seeing their loveliness,

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless blink,  
The dewfall hawk comes crossing the shades to alight  
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn.

He is emphatically not a member of a kind of secret society, a sharer of mysteries as incomprehensible to his fellows as Wordsworth was to an elderly lady who remembered him at Grasmere. 'Mister Wudsworth, e went umming and boeing about, and she, Miss Dorothy, kept close behind im, and she picked up the bits as e let em fall and tak em down and put em on paper for him. And you may be very well sure as how she didn't understand nor make sense out of em, and I doubt that he didn't know much about them either, himself, but howivver there's a great many folks as

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

do, I dare say" The poet only claims a vision more vivid and exciting than is given to the ordinary man He is still an interpreter but no longer, as in the days of Socrates, an interpreter of the gods He sees life as the old lady in *Esther Waters* saw it—as "something lovely and exciting and irrevocably sad"; and it is his function to interpret life to all those able to live it He feels, as every artist feels, an unconquerable desire to awaken men to beauty

I saw this morning a big dark wine-cellar and warehouse, with doors standing open, for a moment I saw an awful vision in my mind, you know what I mean,—in the dark vault men with lights were running to and fro, it is true that is a thing you can see daily, but there are moments when the daily common things make an extraordinary impression and have a deep significance and a different aspect<sup>1</sup>

It is the significance of the apparently trivial that the poet reveals All men have experienced the same ordinary things it is the poet who shows them to be beautiful and mysterious and exciting The difference between the poet and the ordinary man is not merely that the poet has the power of expression to a far greater degree not merely that the ordinary man will express his Thoughts on Nightingales by a few trite words or by an inarticulate silence, and that the poet will write, "Thou wast not born for death," or

Listen, Eugenia—  
How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!  
Again—thou hearest!  
Eternal Passion!  
Eternal Pain!

There is something more to it than that The poet has a

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, I 145

## *On Poetry and Appreciation*

deeper capacity for basic perception and imaginative realization. By which I mean that Herrick, looking at daffodils, is not only more profoundly conscious and appreciative of their beauty than most other men have the power to be, but also sees (in that flash of insight to which Van Gogh alludes) the supremely simple and poetic idea that death takes us as it takes the flowers. The ordinary man does not see that, till it has been pointed out to him by the poet. *There is a poetic idea—the expression in beautiful words and through a beautiful medium of a universal feeling. It is the difference between knowing, as we all know, that death comes to everyone, and putting it such a way as*

Sceptre and crown  
Must tumble down,  
And in the dust be equal made  
With the poor crooked scythe and spade,

or

Many the ways, the little home is one.

The theme is, after all, only an excuse—as the nightingale was for Keats, or the skylark for Shelley I have always suspected that Wordsworth was more interested in his meditations on travellers in some shady haunt among Arabian sands than in the solitary Highland lass which gave him the opportunity to indulge in them. Nor do I fancy that either Herrick or Wordsworth wanted merely to write about daffodils. They were but a medium but only a poet could hang his hat upon such pegs.

The mind of a poet does in some way seem to catch fire. He is thrown into a state of unbearable emotional excitement, on the heels of which follows the impulse to create, and finally the labour and agony of fitting his inspiration to a

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

“mould”—*realizing the vision*, as Cézanne used to say. I suppose anyone who writes sincerely experiences something of the pangs of the greatest poets (Poor Haydon’s diary proves that) He experiences something—finds it suddenly significant, and inspiration will come perhaps as a quick flash of thought, or as a vivid mental picture, or even as a couplet. And then he tries to seize it. Warily he spreads wide the nets of his imagination. The sea is undefined and inchoate, with a million lovely creatures in it. There is a kind of chaos in the mind: adjectives, half-phrases, words—and all around a formless coloured mist of sound and thought and feeling. Then he draws in his nets, watching all the loveliest and most phantasmal things vanish to nothing. But something is caught, moulded to a form, and set down on paper. We can dream a fragment of the vision that made the seventh verse of the *Ode to the Nightingale*, or the final verse of *Autumn*: visions that sprang in one case from a sight of Claude’s *Enchanted Castle*, and in the other from a country walk. We can see the fish struggling from the net—“charmed the wide casements,” he writes: “of keelless seas” then “magic casements”—and nets at last that lovely thing “perilous.” Or see how that line

Drows’d with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next swathe and all its twined flowers

was born so painfully from

Dozed with red poppies while thy reaping hook  
Spares from some slumbrous minutes while warm slum-  
bers creep,

and

Dozed with a fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next sheath and all its honied flowers

## On Poetry and Appreciation

It seems to me that all this process of ferment—of casting the net of the imagination wider and deeper—is something quite impossible to define. One can analyse only the thing completed. But when the fish are gasping on the shore—all these tangles of seaweed these adjectives, broken phrases (and mixtures of metaphors)—*then* the Daemon goes and the Craftsman comes to gather the fish and sort them out and make them ready for the market. That is Form.

Poetry, like music and painting, demands not only knowledge in its audience, but also imagination, sensitiveness in a word, culture—or in an even more absurd word, Education. First of all the writer creates and then expresses a thought or an emotion by means of the symbols of his art. And a full appreciation—which is only understanding added to enjoyment—of any work of art requires a kind of diluted act of creation on the part of the reader. Yeats writes such a line as

The years, like great black oxen tread the world,

and a full appreciation of that passage demands not only understanding but imagination. For there is no poetry at all to be found where none is brought. <sup>1</sup>

The reader must be sincere, as the writer is sincere. Sincerity is not necessarily truth to fact. Sincerity in life and sincerity in art are not wholly the same things. Sincerity in life is honesty of mind, truth to facts as they are but sincerity in literature is that writing which gives the reader the impression of truth to things as they are, whatever the writer himself may have thought or felt. Everyone knows that Trollope really conceived all his characters as puppets



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

but he has managed to make Mrs Proudie and Archdeacon Grantly so true to fact in the minds of his readers that they seem living figures. Passionate sincerity can produce the death-beds of Dickens and the lyrics of Cornelius Whur, as well as the sonnets of Shakespeare.

Thus, I fancy, the difference between the great poet and the minor poet is not merely a matter of sincerity. It has more to do with the larger capacity for emotion that the great poet possesses than with his more perfect mastery of technique. Often enough his technique is not so perfect. There seems to be always a "ragged edge" to the greatest works of genius. The polished perfection of the Caroline poets is its own limitation: it is an end in itself. The loveliest lyrics of Shakespeare are only beginnings: they stand at the border of untravelled and untraversable shores.

The highest poetry appeals to all, except the half-educated or the Philistine. Minor poetry appeals only to the few. And it is the minor poetry that receives the rudest jars from fashion. It seems incredible that such a verse as this:

Then through the white surf did she haste  
To clasp her lovely swain,  
When, ah! a shark bit through his waist,  
His heart's blood dy'd the main!<sup>1</sup>

could have formed part of a serious and even tragic poem. But opinions alter, and definitions with them. Few now would be as contented with Mr Feathernest's description of a fine poem as was Lord Anophel Achthar a hundred years ago.

A fine poem is a luminous development of the complicated

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<sup>1</sup> J. Granger, *Bryan and Pereene*, 1759

## *On Poetry and Appreciation*

machinery of action and passion, exalted by sublimity, softened by pathos, irradiated with scenes of magnificence, figures of loveliness, and characters of energy, and harmonized with infinite variety of melodious combination.<sup>1</sup>

It is the same with the age that admires Ella Wheeler Wilcox or Alfred Noyes as with the age that wept over Eliza Cooke or that lauded the turgidity of Cowley

Nothing in our age, I have observed, is more preposterous than the running judgments upon Poetry and Poets when we shall hear those things commended and cry'd up for the best writings which a man would scarce vouchsafe to wrap any wholesome drug in.

Such is Ben Jonson's warning to the critic and we are no nearer yet to a discovery of what this thing called poetry is.

All definitions mirror their authors. Thus no one but Shelley could so vaguely and magnificently have said, Poetry is something divine, and been content. No one but Carlyle could have dismissed it with the phrase, "Poetry is musical thought and there is something deplorably characteristic in Santayana's dictum that poetry is only "speech for its own sake and sweetness. Pontifically Matthew Arnold announces poetry to be a criticism of life." Caustically Doctor Johnson retorts, Poetry, Sir, is the essence of Common Sense and with the chill logic of a mathematician, Sir Isaac Newton sums it up by stating that poetry is an ingenious kind of nonsense."

Indeed, I am not sure that he is not nearer to the truth than any of them, for poetry does dwell, if its home can ever be found, certainly in fields bordering the hills of the Chankly Bore, or the forests out of which towered like a

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

prehistoric serpent the head and shoulders of Alice And certainly that element of mystery and unreality must be present in all poetry Allingham, thinking no doubt of his own pleasant fairy verses, suggested once that poetry was "spontaneous and naïve". and was promptly crushed by Tennyson's reply, "The last perfection of poetry is the wild and wonderful."

It will be seen that all these various sayings about poetry tend either to one extreme or the other. Poetry is either a divine message, only partly comprehended by the poet (a "morbid secretion of the brain," Pope called it).<sup>1</sup> or it is an exact science, a pattern of words chosen and chiselled into "the best order."

But poetry is a chapter of Ecclesiastes it is the last broken words of Lear: it is a massed and magnificent phalanx of names in the second book of *Paradise Lost* No one could fail to recognize that such lines as

Time  
Slept as he sleeps upon the silent face  
Of a dark dial in a sunless place;<sup>2</sup>

or

O verrey light of eyen that ben blynde!  
O verrey lust of labour and distresse!<sup>3</sup>

are the stuff of poetry. There are no doubts there That is poetry. But a work like Horne's *Orion* is full of lines that have something in them that poetry shares. and yet are not poetry and yet are very excellent:

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<sup>1</sup> *Martin Scriblerus, On the Art of Sinking*, chapter III

<sup>2</sup> Hood, *The Sea of Death*

<sup>3</sup> Chaucer's *A B C*

## *On Poetry and Appreciation*

Where the snow  
Lit by the far-off and receding moon,  
Now feels the soft dawn & purpling twilight creep  
Over your ridges.

Poetry is not here. And yet there is poetry in

Frères humains qui après nous vivez,  
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,  
Car si pitié de nous povres avez,  
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous merci.<sup>1</sup>

There is poetry in that magnificent seventeenth-century passage

Where is Bohun? Where is Mowbray? Where is Mortimer?  
Nay which is more and most of all, where is Plantagenet? They  
are entombed in the urns and sepulchres of mortality.<sup>2</sup>

And of precisely the same high order of speech are the words  
of Ruth to Naomi

Whither thou goest, I will goe and where thou lodgest, I will  
lodge thy people shall be my people and thy God my God  
where thou diest will I die and there will I bee buried. The Lord  
doe so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

What, then, are the signs of poetry? What is the link that  
so recognizably binds together utterances so diverse?

Definitions have so often been either too fantastic (like  
Plato's), too cloudy (like Shelley's), or too exact and material  
(like Dr Johnson's) It would be easy enough to suggest  
a fantastic variation on the Platonic theory of Knowledge.  
One might suggest that poetry is recollected emotion—not  
in the Wordsworthian sense, but the Platonic. Wordsworth

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

says that poetry is the crystallization into shape of emotions consciously recollected. Perhaps art of all kinds, and poetry in particular, is reminiscential emotion: an unconscious double experience of forgotten feeling—a calling out of the wells of our atavistic past the joys and sorrows which are the heritage of the human race.

Which is, of course, nonsense: but a fairly typical example of the extravagant vagueness of most definitions. It attempts to define poetry as a dictionary defines a cabbage. A cabbage is a single entity: it preserves its essential cabbagedom from the prenatal life underground to the dissolution in the ultimate pot. But poetry is not a single entity. It is a loose word, loosely used to define an emotional effect that can be obtained by some thirty different means. If poetry is truth carried alive into the heart by passion, what else is music, what else is Ruysdael's *Scheveningen*, or the *Nikè Apteros*, or the *Jupiter Symphony*? All these fail to answer the question. All are either as ponderously inadequate and simple as Darwin's, who called poetry merely "something silly": or as vague and wild and meaningless as Crashaw's, who called it the language of the angels.

And yet, turgid or direct, sane or wild, everyone knows what those definitions are striving for. Everyone is conscious of this thing called poetry, revealing itself in so many different lights and moods, possibly because there is some truth in that theory of Sainte-Beuve, that in most men a poet once died young.

Poetry I believe to be primarily music: superior to music only because it can send the mind travelling to even more magical islands. Music, too, is sound allied to intellectual content: but how far less can it touch the imagination with flame! Yet poetry, genuine poetry, if not the highest, is

## On Poetry and Appreciation

often little more than a mere loveliness of sound. All the reputation of Poe and Swinburne, and much of the reputation of Tennyson, rest on poems that mean nothing whatever apart from the delight they can give to the ear and the pictures they can create in the mind. For music alone makes merely such a line as

The mellow ouzel fluting in the elm

or

Serene, imperial Eleonore!

lines only a little more stimulating than the Utopian poems that introduced Coryat's *Crudities* to a mocking public. But even in Poe's *Helen*, or Swinburne's *Forsaken Garden*, are no remarks of even moderate intellectual quality. The loveliest thing Poe ever produced is the first verse of *To One in Paradise*, which, apart from a vague statement, means nothing whatever, but whose power of imaginative stimulus is boundless. I fancy there is little more than music and this power of stimulation in the most haunting verses of the *Garden of Proserpine*. But music alone can make beauty and how much more with the evocative quality of words! Milton, himself so learned a musician, has made out of words a melody as rich and complex as the *Eroica Symphony*. He plays on language as if on a flute when dusk falls on Eden as if he spoke through the surge of drums and brass at the gathering of the hosts of Satan. He creates discords, and resolves them exactly as a musician creates and resolves. And the message of *Paradise Lost* is to-day only a message to the imagination. Mencken attacks poetry for appealing to the imagination rather than the reason thereby denying that it is only the small truths to fact that can be accepted by the reason, and that the only method

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

by which man can apprehend the Universal is through his imagination. Longinus called sublimity the "echo of a great soul," and that echo can only find its answer in those dusky chambers of the mind too vast for the lamp of logic to illuminate.

I have mentioned Poe and Swinburne, genuine but minor poets—poets of music and fancy, like Walter de la Mare. It is when one reads Shakespeare that one finds this double appeal of poetry to the mind and the imagination, the sensuous and the evocative, so amply illustrated.

To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death

Essentially the same idea—the idea of the monotony of life, the dreary recurrence of human experience—is expressed in prose by the *Anti-Jacobin*:

The beef of to-morrow will succeed to the mutton of to-day  
as the mutton of to-day succeeded to the veal of yesterday

It is expressed, too, in a luscious melody for strings in the first movement of the *B Minor Symphony*. Here is plain prose appealing only to the intellect (or to the sense of humour): music appealing to the emotions, and poetry opening up her wide, uncharted fields to the imagination.

The function of poetry, says Mencken,<sup>1</sup> is "to soothe the wrinkled and fevered brow with beautiful balderdash," a remark which has an element of justice in it.<sup>2</sup> For to-day,

<sup>1</sup> *Selected Prejudices*.

<sup>2</sup> "I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think poetry itself a mere Jack o' Lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its

## On Poetry and Appreciation

more than at any other time in history, poetry is becoming a kind of drug. It would have been reasonable enough to have defended it in Shakespeare's, or even Tennyson's day as a commentary on or an illumination of life. But factory wheels are the music of a world of machines and where leisure ceases to be creative, poetry, music, and painting must suffer the competition of the wireless and the cinema. And—to a certain somewhat limited type of mind—Truth and Falsehood are positives, admitting of no degrees, no subtle conditions, where a strict truth can be blazingly false and an apparent lie yet be true.

Which leads me to the subject of Laidenism in poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Laidenism is imaginative or artistic lying and I use the word to distinguish it from the falsehood created purely for material purposes. When a small boy says that he has written or learnt an exercise which he has, in fact, omitted to write or learn, he is uttering a falsehood, with the purely material and practical end in view either of gaining undeserved praise, or of escaping well-deserved punishment. But when Shakespeare writes, "Thy eternal summer shall not fade," he is (to the material mind) as far from the strict truth as was the small boy. Shakespeare is committing a Laidenism: he is saying something false to material fact, and yet true to something that transcends fact and is truth itself. That is

brilliance.      Ethereal things may at least be thus real, divided under three heads—Things real—things semi-real—and nothings. Things real, such as existences of sun, moon, and stars—and passages of Shakespeare. Things semi-real, such as love, the clouds, etc., which require a greeting of the spirit to make them wholly exist—and Nothings, which are made great and dignified by an ardent pursuit."  
—KRATA, *Letter XLI*.

I have coined this word from a character in Max Beerbohm's *Seven Men*.



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

perhaps one of the chief differences between poetry and prose. Prose dares not Laidrize. Once it does so it becomes Poetry. When Pater says, "His life has three divisions—thirty years at Florence, nearly twenty years at Milan, then nineteen years of wandering, till he sinks to rest under the protection of Francis the First at the Château de Clou," he is writing prose. he is being true to fact as we know it, just as Arnold Bennett is true to fact as we know it when he describes the death of Darius Clayhanger. But as soon as Pater writes, "Hers is the head upon which 'all the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary," he is writing poetry. He is Laidrizing. He is true to something truer than mere fact. "Fancy with fact is just one fact the more": and it is possible that Browning's story of the murder of Pompilia is as true as history, and quite certain that the *Ring and the Book* is closer to truth than the *Old Yellow Book*, from which he took it.

Great art neither affirms nor denies. It adds. It adds as the Symphonies of Beethoven have added to Nature's sounds, as Claude added to her landscapes, as Shakespeare added to man's experience, and even altered and improved man himself beyond the powers of evolution.

Poetry, like all art, is born of emotion. the more intense this emotion, the greater the poetry that results—as Donne's *Funeral* is greater than Carew's *Disdain Returned*. It has also a beauty of sound and form and an element of the strange and mysterious. The poet is first a man who feels deeply: a man of passion, like Keats or Clare or Coleridge. He is a musician in words. he is gifted with a mind that sees all things from some new, unexpected angle. and, finally he is a craftsman.

There is no great poem in literature which does not

## On Poetry and Appreciation

contain the quality of passion—this flame of the imagination Blake could see angels in an apple-tree and Ben Jonson consumed a whole night in lying looking to his great toe, about which he hath seen tartars and turks, Romans and Carthaginians feight in his imagination.”<sup>1</sup> What this passion may be no one knows. One can only point to lines where one knows it lives—to the soliloquies of *Hamlet*, to the invocation to the Third Book of *Paradise Lost*. In Pope’s *Elegy on the Death of an Unfortunate Lady*, quite suddenly with the line, “Is there no bright reversion in the sky?” a thrill, an unaccountable quiver of intensity enters the poem, and makes it perhaps the one genuine piece of lyrical passion, of major poetry, in the works of Pope. The same thing in an even more startling degree occurs in Crashaw’s famous Hymn to Saint Theresa, the *Flaming Heart*. In a single magnificent line he rises from the tedious maunderings of seventeenth-century “wit” to poetry.

Live in these conquering leaves live all the same

Jonson alluded to the kind of tuneing and riming fall : in the type of verse so familiar to magazine readers, that is metrically impeccable, that has rhythm and a modicum of meaning, and lacks completely the intensity of feeling that alone can raise verse to poetry. It runs and slides, and onely makes a sound. *Womens-Poets* they are call’d, as you have *womens-Tailors*.

Walt Whitman proves that a man may become a poet, though he may be no craftsman. It is the torrent of Whitman’s passion, the intensity of his feeling, that carries his amorphous lines by sheer force to the realms of poetry.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a *chef-d'oeuvre* of the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of Heaven

This to me is like gold in the ore It is the stuff of poetry: but it is poetry without form. It is only distinguished from prose by the passion that inspires it It is in fact poetry of the same order as the Book of Ecclesiastes, and it differs from the poetry of Browning as much as Browning differs from the Bible. D. H. Lawrence, in those now long-faded poems of *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*, has now and then the same authentic vigour that makes of even formless speech poetry rather than prose He has a magical power over words they dance as he wills, exact, colourful, evocative:

Wineskins of brown morbidity,  
Autumnal excrementa!

That, of medlars And of grapes·

Look how black, how blue-black, how gloved in Ethiopian darkness,  
Dropping among his leaves hangs the dark grape

The word "gloved" is Shakespearean, as is the word "folded" in·

Tuscan cypresses,  
What is it?  
Folded in like a dark thought?

The lack of music is similar to the lack of form Many of the earlier poems of Hardy are clotted so with consonants that they are difficult to read aloud. and yet remain perfect

## *On Poetry and Appreciation*

in idea and structure. Like Donne, he deserved hanging for not keeping of accent. To-day the verse

as smooth, as soft as creame,  
To which there is no torrent, nor scarce streame

has fallen so far into disrepute that ruggedness alone is often counted as sufficient virtue, and that Donne towers high above all but the very greatest of the Elizabethans.

Finally, there is that element of a perpetual slight novelty " This is noticeable chiefly in the imaginative attitude of the poet, as when Hardy imagines the moon like a dying dolphin's eye seen through a lapping wave" as when Keats writes of

undescribed sounds  
That come a-swooning over hollow grounds  
And wither drearily on barren moors,

as when John Bannister Tabb speaks of a face on which

The tenderness of visions gone  
In shadow seemed to stay

But the same novelty of attitude is seen in the very words that poets choose. Because his mind looks at everything from a slightly new facet, necessarily the poet's vocabulary differs a little from the vocabulary of the ordinary man. That is the whole reason for and the whole justification of a Poetic Diction.

And summons given, the dread consult began.

Milton makes the line magical by displacing an accent. And a hundred times the enchantment is woven by a subtle alteration in the meaning of common words, or by a shift of rhythm

And wild roses, and ivy serpentine.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

It is perhaps possible to say that, of these four qualities, any one or two of them can create poetry, if that one or two include passion. Passion, music, form, originality. . . . Walt Whitman is a great poet, though he has only the first and the last. A song like *Drink to me only* can still be a fine lyric, though it has only the music of the words and the intensity of the emotion behind it. And intensity is but another name for sincerity without which all writing sinks beneath the level of journeyman's verse or prose. It is only a Shakespeare, a Milton, who can command all qualities at once, and they but seldom.

The index to any anthology of poems will reveal how false is that idea that certain subjects are "poetical" and certain subjects prosaic. Even the tiniest flame of poetry in the most ordinary man will recognize the beauty of sunset or stars. But F. S. Flint can write a poem on hats, and Muriel Stuart on a seed-shop, and Edmund Blunden on a pig. Poetry does not merely mean the art of turning emotion into music. It means sympathy and a love of life and an unsleeping imagination. And, if all have something of that spirit at the first, it is only the few who can keep it till the end. Imagination is the last of the gifts bestowed at birth and dreams grow faded. Not the least tragic thing in life is the loss of a gift we never realized we possessed.

It is the virtue of poets and the function of poetry to teach us to take nothing for granted, to treat life as an escapade—a dark adventure or a mad, but always an adventure. No man can keep his soul if he loses his sense of wonder or his love of loveliness. It is easy to appreciate the unexpected, the strange. It is easy to see the marvel of Chartres Cathedral, if we happen to live in Ludgate Circus, but not so easy to keep alive to the beauty of that cathedral under whose

## *On Poetry and Appreciation*

shadow we dwell. We can enjoy all things strange—sea voyages, and deserts, and nightingales in woods of moon-shine. The poet enjoys even more the old, common, forgotten things—health, for example, or sleep, or loveliness

When all my days are ending,  
And I have no song to sing,  
I think I shall not be too old  
To stare at everything  
As I stared once at a nursery door  
Or a tall tree and a swing

No object is what we call prosaic. The most ordinary things become in time transformed into the ingredients of romance, and who would not now marvel over the veil of Ruth or the drinking cup of Alexander the Great? Even so, those common things—haystacks, and the earthenware at the plough—are steeped in a profounder poetry than the jewels of Prester John or the roses on the grave of Omar. Allon Backuth, that weeping oak, under which Deborah, Rebecka's nurse, died, and was buried, may not survive the memory of such everlasting monuments." The poet is only a quintessence of common humanity, and has never been so much a teacher as a Revealer, an Interpreter. Taste, which means the recognition of beauty, is two-thirds of education and the love of poetry is something more rare and enduring than knowledge.

Look thy last on all things lovely  
Every hour Let no night  
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber  
Till to delight  
Thou have paid thy utmost blessing

Appreciation of poetry, which is appreciation of beauty, is

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

education in the highest sense. Education fits a man for the art and business of living, and if he goes through his days blind to beauty, he might as well rust in the grave. The teaching of appreciation will not make a man a poet—a man scarcely need be beautiful in order to appreciate beauty—it opens his eyes to the world, in a sense, *completes* him. The things which a love of beauty teaches are not to be numbered or analysed. It teaches such elusive virtues as happiness and philosophy *Est animus victor annorum, et senectute cedere nescius*. It hailes the souls out of men's bodies and gives to their minds a certain order and harmony. From which narrow point of view it is most gloriously useless. But whoever has been taught appreciation will find that poetry has made this "much-loved earth more lovely", and one day, it may be, all the world holds will be something less than dream. The love of poetry means the love of beauty in every form—the awakening of a consciousness of the unattainable loveliness of the world.

## XII

### ON POETRY AND APPRECIATION

#### II

APPRECIATION is a catholic word. It means, as I have pointed out, the ability to recognize and enjoy the good in every thing—to enjoy what is beautiful in the *Pastime of Pleasure* as well as what is beautiful in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

The vintage is as old as time,  
And bright as sunset, pressed and prime.

But such a gift comes only with years, and to many never at all.

In the first place, it is to be remembered once more that the poet himself is the best teacher. And the less words in front of the poem, the clearer it will be. People come to the reading of Shakespeare with a superstitious reverence already born in them. They approach him with minds clouded by accumulated prejudice. They have a secret fear that he is dull, long winded, above their heads and they have so often been told about his magnificent poetry that they are terrified lest they should be unable to discover it. They have been informed, perhaps, that *Othello* is a supremely great play, and they find themselves plunged immediately into an interminable council of State, the unnatural horrors of blank verse, the intricacies of a complicated plot. In fact, if they ever finish *Othello* at all, it gives them no delight. It is a task accomplished. Every educated man should have been to Covent Garden and heard the *Rag*. Every educated



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

man should have read Shakespeare. A duty has been done, and the sense of pride is mingled with an enormous relief.

Now Shakespeare is, of all poets, the most towering, the hardest fully to appreciate. Therein lies something of the absurdity of an educational system which "teaches" Shakespeare to children of twelve and fourteen. Every child should know something of its national poet. True—but why? Merely because it is "done" to have read Shakespeare? Or because a love of Shakespeare is a means to a fuller and richer existence and one of the great delights life has to offer? If for the former reason, then Shakespeare is "done" in the same sense that Milan Cathedral is done by an American tourist. Shakespeare serves them as *Don Quixote* served George Eliot, who once unforgivably made the remark "Nevertheless, *Don Quixote* should be read, as it enables one to understand literary allusions." Poetry emphatically cannot be taught unless a love for poetry already exists. That love of poetry is innate in every small child, it is fostered by reading and enjoying poets, till he comes at last to enjoy Shakespeare as De Quincey enjoyed *Hamlet*—reading it on the stairs by candlelight, thrilled as if by a detective story. If it is only then that the pedagogue steps in, all his comments can destroy but little. How thoroughly a love of poetry can be crushed by ill-advised comment scarcely needs illustration.

For the young, it is only the business of introduction that need be considered. To give him the *Prelude* or the *Faerie Queene* will be to kill his possible appreciation of Wordsworth or Spenser. The qualities in poetry that appeal to children are simplicity—the dignified, calm simplicity of Longfellow, or the poetic simplicity of Coleridge—action,

## On Poetry and Appreciation

and, above all, colour. Children see in pictures and read in pictures. Swinburne is a poet who will reveal by his splendour and his music to a young imagination with a yet undeveloped sense of beauty the magic that can be done with words. But Swinburne is the poet of adolescence. Children want less heady stuff. The quality that appeals first is the quality of simplicity—simplicity of thought and style. And the three poets of childhood are Blake, Cowper, and Coleridge. The first poem, I think, everyone should read or have read to him is the *Ancient Mariner*. A full and genuine appreciation of the *Ancient Mariner* (not easily to be won) is the finest introduction to a catholic appreciation of all poetry and it is a poem that, once loved, is never wholly forgotten. For it appeals to every type. Its simplicity of outline, the story it tells, the imaginative pictures it evokes, even its moral background find their echoes in divers minds. And of all poems (in spite of the *Road to Xanadu*) this needs the least comment. It should be read straight through, as a story, and enjoyed as a story, before there is any attempt to emphasize its beauty or to draw attention to a possible moral.

It is a little astonishing that Cowper should be so universal a favourite. Only one side of Cowper, however, and that side of him the one he took least seriously—Cowper the Sage, the Prophet, the Humanitarian, Cowper the Miltonic Disciple—here is no appeal to youth. There is always a faint air of the theatrical about him when he begins to instruct instead of to amuse. The purple patch doesn't quite come off, and there is a subdued titter in the background. When a rat devoured the bullfinch of Lady Throckmorton, he composed on the spur of the moment a humorous and charming trifle. When white men sell negroes into slavery,

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

he undergoes a laborious allegorical dream about "Africa's sorrowful shore." When he says.

Read ye that run the solemn truth  
With which I charge my page,  
A worm is at the bud of youth  
And at the root of age,

one can only reply that the "solemn truth" sounds too much like an air from the *Beggar's Opera* to be convincing. I have never yet met a child who enjoyed Alexander Selkirk—even though he was a genuine buccaneer and the hero of *Robinson Crusoe*. When he stands on his desert island and cries:

I am monarch of all I survey,  
My right there is none to dispute,  
From the centre all round to the sea  
I am lord of the fowl and the brute,

one instinctively expects a rejoinder in the shape of a ringing chorus of female voices

He is monarch of all he surveys,  
And his right there is none to dispute, etc

It is the concrete that appeals to childhood, and it is when he is dealing with concrete experiences that Cowper is at his ease. He really could make an epic of a sofa, as he never could have made an epic of the sea. He was comfortable on the one, and would certainly have been ill on the other. He is at his best in the kindly, humorous atmosphere of the ballads. The years he spent with Mrs. Unwin at Weston, feeding his doves, playing with his favourite hare—years in which a viper was an adventure and an election candidate the subject of a week's ecstatic conversation—these years

## On Poetry and Appreciation

fostered and developed the gentle, mocking humour which is his especial heritage. It is tenderer than Prior, less shallow than Gay. These small, playful impromptus are the true legacy Cowper left for childhood. There is the epitaph on Old Tiny, the hare

Dozing out his idle noons  
And every night at play—

Dick and Tom, the two goldfinches, whose names should go down in history with Damon and Pythias, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, glow worms, jackdaws, parrots—nothing seemed too humble or insignificant for one who found it so easy to love the small things of the world. But the *Ballad of John Gilpin* is the best and most famous of his verses. It is the most glorious *jeu d'esprit* in the language. The characterization is so subtle, the metre so apparently simple, that the supreme art of the thing escapes one at a first reading. The very idea of the ballad is a magnificent joke—the anxiety of Gilpin's wife that all should be done well, their excitement at the prospect of a day's freedom from the linen-drapery, the splendid description of the ride, and the children in the streets thinking it is a race for a thousand pounds, the joy of his wife leaning from the balcony to admire his gallant horsemanship—never once is the irony overdone. It is a work of art perfect in its genre and completely satisfying. It sums up in fifty verses all the tenderness, the humour, and the simplicity of the poet's character. I know of no other poem of the same length which is so astonishingly alive, in which the characters are so utterly real. It may be a great honour to have a marble statue of oneself in Westminster Abbey, but I think Cowper would have held it a far greater honour to have the walls of half the nurseries of England

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

covered with crude pictures of the mad, romantic gallop of John Gilpin.

There is every reason why Cowper should be among the earliest poets that one reads. It is absurd to attempt any kind of chronological arrangement: to read bowdlerized Chaucer, then a few modernized mediaeval ballads, and so, by way of an emasculated Shakespeare to a truncated Milton, a crippled Wordsworth, and a diluted Tennyson. Poetry is even less than prose thus to be divided into compartments. There is no Time Spirit in poetry. There is no advantage in knowing that the following verse.

O they sailed in to Bethlehem,  
—To Bethlehem, to Bethlehem,  
Saint Michael was the Steresman,  
Saint John sat in the horn

was written in the fifteenth century, and, in the nineteenth, this:

Snow was falling, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak mid-winter  
Long ago

The spirit that inspires them both is the same and timeless. Except for a certain order and clarity in the mind, I am not sure that an insistence on dates and periods is ever a very great advantage in literature. Certainly to young children poetry should be revealed as a land where every garden is free and has its own peculiar genius, not as a park round which we are conducted in orderly procession by parties of too-conscientious porters. The *Testament of Beauty* is as old as the *Iliad*. The flame that burns in them both was lit from the same taper.

## On Poetry and Appreciation

We have all had to learn poetry, as we have all had to learn the dates of the Kings and Queens of England, but the learning of poetry from a practical point of view is utterly useless. To force anyone to learn by heart a poem he neither wishes to learn nor enjoys learning is no less foolish than to force him to get by heart in the original language the first dozen lines of the *Hymn to Idduna*. They will both be equally meaningless to him. Neither will train his memory any better than the learning of the irregular comparisons, or the verbs in  $\mu\lambda$ . Why then, if not to train the memory, do we set poems to be learnt—ten lines a lesson, even though they happen to end on a comma? The answer is probably buried in some dust of a mediæval *studium generale*, or perhaps in those Victorian drawing rooms where all children made their debut with *Casablanca*, or the *Village Blacksmith*. It is as unfair to make a child learn a poem he does not enjoy as to make him write an essay on a subject which fails to interest him. All children read poetry, if they are encouraged in the right way and all children are eager to learn those poems which they enjoy. No poem, after all, can be appreciated to the full till it has wholly or in part been committed to the memory. What one learns in childhood one seldom entirely forgets and most of us, even after these many years, could repeat a few verses of those poems we once so laboriously recited. Burdening some dark recesses of our memory the stale cadence of those songs still haunts us. At our cry the bats crowd from the cold chimneys. We shall carry them with us, in love or loathing, to the grave. The reason why we make boys learn poetry is, if you like, to teach them a better appreciation and understanding of a poem which they have already come to enjoy or, if you like, it is merely to give them pleasure, and to make

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

one lesson at least something of a delight as well as a labour.

Afterwards comes the business, the pleasure, the peril of commentary. Sincerity is the first essential of the critic as it is of the poet. In approaching any poem the mere translation of the literal meaning is lamentably often the greatest difficulty to be confronted. Poetry remains an esoteric art, the cult of the superior few, because only ten men in every hundred can even *read* intelligently. There are, in every poem, two points to be observed, and only two—what the poet says, and how he says it: the Sense and the Emotional Impression. Literalism is fatal to criticism. Ruskin remarks (in a way that recalls Butler on the Brontës) of these lines from *Alton Locke*:

They rowed her in across the rolling form,  
The cruel, crawling foam

"The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl." One remembers Doctor Johnson's attack on *Lycidas*, where he petulantly complains that the average Cambridge undergraduate is not in the habit of driving sheep, or winding horns. But it is equally false to dismiss such pictures as examples of poetic licence—to look on poetry as beautiful nonsense, and the poet as an individual specially permitted to talk through his hat. Great poetry constructs just as logically as prose. But some will respond to sense and some to the emotional appeal: few in an equally balanced degree to both. Thus the normal man will not find that he enjoys in the same measure each of the following verses:

## On Poetry and Appreciation

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove  
O no! it is an ever fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth is unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved  
I never writ nor no man ever loved.

Thou wast not born for death immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown!  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn  
The same that oft times hath  
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas in farry lands forlorn.

He will listen to the first with *his mind* to the second perhaps with something of that "admiration amounting to awe," with which Boffin drank in the stanzas of Mr. Wegg. Thus a prose paraphrase can only suggest the literal meaning of a verse the emotion is inevitably either weakened or lost. Paraphrase is a misused art. No poem should ever be paraphrased unless there is also some attempt made to recount its imaginative suggestions, the images it creates, the emotions it arouses.

The child is often the best critic, for he has not first to



## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

rid himself of the cloud of associations dormant in the adult mind. The normal man comes to the reading of a poem hampered by a hundred obstacles. He will find magic even in lines like these:

Dew glimmered on cold grasses, down the lane  
The dark-blue shadows stirred, the drowsy skies  
Were pale with the first stars, whose myriad eyes  
On that quiet place shone down .

because they remind him, perhaps, of an experience or a personal recollection which never existed in the poet's mind. He will read into the lines a crowd of pictures which do not legitimately belong to them, which are, in fact, his own. Thus the words "green woods of Spring" will seem to him to possess as subtle a power of evocation as a forgotten perfume, whereas they serve merely to press a button which sends galloping over enchanted fields his own imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Or he will react automatically to certain phrases or adjectives, the common coin of poetry: and this *prava imitatio* of true poetry will shed a borrowed glamour over what he reads. "How little a difference is there between the commonplace and the work of genius!" exclaimed Gauguin. The false Florimell is "so luelie and so like" that it is only by the smallest word that she betrays herself: and it is only by

<sup>1</sup> And I suppose it is for this reason that I find an indescribable sweetness and melancholy, like the scent of lavender in an old drawer, caught from Heaven knows what remote memories, in but these five lines

Come home again, come home again,  
Mine own sweetheart, come home again—  
Ye are gone astray  
Out of your way,  
Therefor, sweetheart, come home again

## On Poetry and Appreciation

arduous training that the reader can pierce the enchantment. He will perhaps praise one poem because it says what he fancies the poet should say in those circumstances. He will object to Donne and approve of Gray, because the one lacks and the other shares his own emotions at the thought of death. Or he may come to a poem with a set of formulae in his head—this is lawful, that is not poetry, thus 'breaks the rules of scansion.

It is fatally easy to read into a poem meanings it does not contain, to see beauties which are not in it but in the reader's mind. Associative memory and a subtlety which would have been the envy of a seventeenth-century divine have induced Robert Graves to spend a dozen pages over Cummings's *Sunset*. This poem, chiefly remarkable for its typography, is evidently not written as Clare's *Autumn* was written, to create a vision in the mind nor, like Housman's "With rue my heart is laden, to rouse profound emotion nor even, like *Night Thoughts*, to instruct and moralize. If it was consciously and deliberately done, then its purpose could only have been to create a pattern on paper (which encroaches on the province of the artist), or to produce a series of sonorous but irrelevant noises (which parodies the function of the musician). But since neither the pattern nor the sounds of this or many other modernist poems are particularly impressive, one is forced to the conclusion that they have been written only as a convenience to the author, who chooses such a method to liberate the thrall'd polyps of his subconscious. If lines suggestive only as a mathematical formula is suggestive can be proved" a good poem, does there remain any critical apparatus except sympathy, imagination, and common sense worth any thing?

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

SMASH,  
hell,  
Honk, honk  
the curlews creak . .

These words occurred in a dream, and in the dream they made a poem as lovely as a Shakespeare sonnet. It is the reader's business to discover the beauty in the poet's mind when he wrote it Well, why not?

It has long been recognized by the moderns that language is an intolerable fetter, not only to the imagination of the author, but to that also of the reader Thus the word "twilight" calls up with its utterance a host of lovely visions from the subconscious (automatic dream-reflexes)—memories of gardens in blue dusk, and meadows under mist Any word *added* to "twilight" at once limits the play of the dream-reflexes Say "starred twilight," and at once the reader is forced to reject the crowd of associative memories which create for him a dim and moonless miasma of grey rising over river reeds or the cedars of Xanadu Say "moonless twilight," and at once the star and moon associations disappear

But in this exquisite lyric the poet has allowed no words to limit the play of the mind's Ariel He acts as a magician deftly touching few (but how splendid) keys, and setting free illimitable vistas of loveliness The opening of the poem (unforgettable in its stark simplicity of diction) is the line:

"SMASH "

At once we gain a Rembrandtesque impression of disaster The air is strident with the explosion of refractory machines and, with a stunned swiftness, follows the second line

"hell "

We catch a momentary glimpse of a saturnine inferno, more terrific than the Asphaltick Lake, with all its Miltonic dream-limitations, the welter of impotent rage and despair in the motorist's

## On Poetry and Appreciation

mind. Hopelessly in baffled fury, he sounds the horn. Again—and yet again—the sound rings over space (for the repetition, so foreign to the usual methods of the Psychopressionists, is here deliberate) and nought answers. What a world of desolation is in those two magnificently chosen words! 'Honk!' And once more, "Honk!"

But the final splendour of the poem is the imagery in the last line. Nothing answers but the voice of Nothing—the curlews straining high above the grey clouds. With a touch less sure the poet might have written, "the curlews call, or cry" or used any other absurdly photographic verb. But he wants to give the impression of utter dreariness, the bleak moor, the thievish encroachment of the dusk, the wild birds winging overhead. He has in his mind the words "bleak" and "cry." Superbly he combines them in a synthesis as magnificent as Tennyson's "tingling stars." Not "the curlews cry across bleak wastes," but simply and movingly, "the curlews *creak* —what an instant impression of windy uplands, with the thin, eerie call drifting down through the infinite inane!

Notice how the rapid surge of the opening couplet is broken suddenly in line 3 by two irregular onomatopoeic beats—"Honk, honk"—mirroring a savage fury of despair. And there follows the long-drawn cumulative line at the close, the remorseless apathy of Heaven, nature passing heedless on its blind ways. It catches the breath away. One remembers how the staccato rhythms of the murder scenes in *Macbeth* are followed by the serenity of the close and one realizes with devout gratitude that (as Mrs. Hemans says)

"Shakespeare is with us still,"

or (as Silas P. Whackenthorpe more poignantly expresses it)

I  
S-  
wan on  
AVON  
flaps. "

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

To lend final illustration to my remarks, let us see how a poet of the older school would have ruined the quiet simplicity, the dignity, the massive yet cunningly interlaced harmonies of the design .

“Jarred the bent brake, spoke-buckled and in vain  
wild echoings his clamorous cries arouse  
born of the red hell’s rage within his brain—  
the frenzied hooter snorts cacophonous

“Only the curlews cry over bleak moors,  
their elfin mockery dwindling less and less  
to a dark solitude, and all the doors  
of twilight open on to nothingness ”

So might one of the now-forgotten versifiers of the twentieth century have written nor will I try further the reader’s patience by asking him to imagine a Wordsworthian sonnet on the same theme

Is this so impossible after all? It is so easy to write Talmudic books around a single poem, and to travel leagues beyond truth on such fantastic wings. Certainly, if an adult can often discover beauties hidden from children, he is also capable of discovering beauties that don’t exist at all, and I am very certain that no child could have been deceived by

Spring  
Too long  
Gongula

The small child (if he understands the actual meaning of the poem) suffers only from a lack of wide reading. He will be unable to see the difference between the true and the imitation, and to him (if indeed they hold any significance at all) the lines·

## On Poetry and Appreciation

And I had made  
Unrecking thence  
Through towers of darkness my dim escalate  
To irreducible glooms of nescience

will be as poetic as Francis Thompson. Apart from having in their minds few associations and no preconceived theories, they are able to appreciate to the full the stuff of poetry—Personification, Imagery, Metaphor. For in the early years most objects are looked upon as living rather than inanimate. Wise beyond learning, children can explore the inexhaustible wells of an ancient and intuitive knowledge. There are two lines of the *Ancient Mariner* which have always seemed to me to be filled with an indescribable loveliness. I have tried to find the secret of their extraordinary charm, and have never been able to put my feelings into words. Perhaps it is their simplicity, or the contrast or just a magical collocation of words strung together, Heaven knows how, like a powerful spell.

The many men so beautiful,  
And they all dead did lie.

I once asked (without in any way suggesting my own opinions) a child of eight to tell me what he felt when he read this. He replied, 'They make me go all soft inside. And there, at once, it seemed was the phrase that had eluded me—a complete summary of the effect of the ultimate mystery of the beautiful. In the following verse:

All in a hot and copper sky  
The bloody sun at noon  
Right up above the mast did stand  
No bigger than the moon.

I could speak of the cunning variations of the metre, of the

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

carefully chosen adjectives, of the repetition of sound in the first two lines—"hot and copper," "bloody sun", I could do all this, and never attain the vividness and simplicity of another small critic who remarked that it "seemed as though it was meant to give you a headache" Their impressions are nearly always in pictures They will miss points obvious enough to anyone in such lines as

Where falls not hail, or rain or any snow,  
Nor ever wind blows loudly but it lies  
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns  
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea

But the picture in their minds will be the more vivid because it is an unobstructed picture And, after all is said and written about rhythms and technique, it is to the pictorial imagination that the poet primarily appeals

CRITICISM OF SHELLEY'S CLOUD (By R F Foley-Philipps, aged eight)

The Cloud seems so fresh As the poem begins, it plunges you into a dream of green It does not *amaze* you to begin with—and afterwards you get used to it as if you were *in* a cloud How white the cloud must be, and how cold! It gives the feeling exactly The "jag of a mountain crag" seems as if it says the snow was rotting away the mountain as if the ice was rolling down with snow, the clouds full of it, and bursting every few seconds on to the mountain side, and white bolders falling down very fast and rapidly It seems in one line as though it came from heaven to earth It is compared to a brooding dove in one line, and in one to a mother's breast, and "I bear light shade for the trees when laid" seems like a May morning under a tree "I wield the flail of the lashing hail," seems as if the white cloud was coming down in a Sweep of ice and hail and snow

Such a paragraph as that leaves a hundred things unsaid

## On Poetry and Appreciation

and unnoticed, but in a queer, confused way it has grasped an essential spirit of the poem. Shelley's *Cloud* does not give an older and more cultivated mind these feelings—we have too long been used to treating the poet as a technician, and forgetting he is an artist. Literary associations swamp this imaginative insight, which is the special gift of the child—and a special quality, too, of the poet.

One of the most popular poems among children is De la Mare's *The Listeners*. This is a poem of escape and the idea of escape has always set the imagination dancing. We are each a microcosm of infinite history and there survive in us memories of things done and suffered millions of years before the accident of birth. The soul's wanderthirst is a thirst for a lost and half forgotten beauty, a beauty which is daily perishing from our lives, and dwells only in unremembered corners of the material. Spring would lose its loveliness and earth her magic had the creation happened yesterday.

Our dreams are tales  
Told in dim Eden  
To Eve's nightingales.

*The Listeners* seems to appeal to children (as to all others) as the most perfect expression of this sense of the continuity of action—this sense that no act is final or forgotten, but that deeds done long ago leave in the dust behind them their half-articulate ghosts. It is a poem of what Alice Meynell has called "multitude in solitude" a poem which crystallizes into legend the idea that an old house or a deserted garden is haunted by living memories, by joys and sorrows and sufferings, long ago done and forgotten—what we sometimes call ghosts. The lines are charged with the mystery of Time. After long years the traveller keeps his age-old



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

tryst—to find the house tenanted only by memories of a buried past To these he entrusts his message, before (overpowered suddenly by the strangeness that lives with moss and cobweb, the handsel of mortal and immortal) he gallops back through the woods The atmosphere of the poem and the effect conveyed by it is one of a living silence, a silence full of whispers—and an unspoken, and scarce articulate sense of dread As a desolate hall is made more desolate by the ticking of a clock or the scratching of rats in the wainscot, silence is made here the deeper by small noises, by tiny movements and stirrings.

His horse in the silence champed the grasses  
Of the forest's ferny floor,  
And a bird flew up out of the turret  
Above the traveller's head

Inside the hall the moonbeams are thronged with these unspeaking ghosts of memory—they crowd on the stairway, listening to the voice from the world they have left And once more silence is emphasized, the echo of the traveller's cry, the small movement of his horse beside him, cropping the dark turf The theme of the whole poem is re-echoed in the last magnificent couplet

It is one of the quietest poems in modern literature Its magic seems partly to lie in its suggestion of ancient peace disturbed I do not know any other lines which bring home to me so strongly a contrast which is never very far from the back of my mind—the contrast between our small, passing lives, and their changeless and impartial surroundings. They live on to house other guests, when we are perished and forgotten The echoes are wakened for a moment, and silence returns again “when the plunging hoofs are gone”

Suppose this poem read through with no such random and meditative commentary. It does not matter so very much at first if the poem is understood or not. One can enjoy it with only a very partial comprehension of what it is all about. Commentary which also acts as interruption serves to break off the sequence of pictures and to disturb the rhythm of the verses. If Macbeth's soliloquy, "To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow," is read, it only hinders or kills appreciation to allude to Montaigne's essay on "To Philosophize is to learn how to die" as a possible prototype. The pedant will argue about the word "recorded," dilate on the interesting metathesis of "dusty" and "study," refer to other Shakespearean similes of the stage—and never mention the one fact worth all of these, that this speech (except only the last speech of Faustus or the address of Satan to the Sun) is the finest and final expression in all literature of Despair. One will have grasped the essential picture, and that needs no elaboration. It is only then that a word can be said about the music and that word a very cautious one. So many people are in the habit of reading "metrically." They see that the poem is written in a certain rhythm, and go cantering through it, falling into a fury of disgust if one of the lines happens to break harness. Metre is only a pattern on which infinite variations can be woven.

Commentary on any poem is to be handled very circumspectly. Some things need little emphasis, others no emphasis can harm. The useless, degrading, and soul-withering comment is the one that fixes a hungry eye on dates, allusions, and classical gods.

*How commentators each dark passage shun,  
And hold their farthing candles to the sun!*

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Underlining the proper names alone can spoil even:

They see Tiresias  
Sitting, staff in hand,  
On the warm, grassy  
Asopus' bank  
His robes drawn over  
His old, sightless head  
Revolving inly  
The doom of Thebes

And what matter it whether Asopus is in Boetia or Attica, or who Menoeceus or the Epigoni were, when there are the high gods on Olympus and the blind man with the curse of Athene on his head?<sup>1</sup>

If the haunting, indefinable spirit of a poem—what is called atmosphere—is once perceived, there need come but few words further. Until full enjoyment is born, from the high spirits of *John Gilpin*, or the melancholy of the *Grecian Urn*, or the quiet reverie of Flecker's *Old Ships*, subtleties can wait. The atmosphere of a poem is at once the most important, intimate, and elusive of its qualities. It is created from sense and sound, from poetical images and associations, a subtle diffusion woven out of rhythms and words and colours. There does seem to be a definite colour in some poems. The essay on the symbolism of Fra Angelico, which Durtal read to the Abbé,<sup>2</sup> is not so fantastic as it appears. For one really can think of Keats in terms of rich reds and

<sup>1</sup> " If any of 'em happen to find out who was Anchises' mother, or pick out of some worm-eaten manuscript a word not commonly known, as suppose it Bubsequa for a cowheard, Bovinator for a Wrangler, Manticulator for a Cutpurse, or dig up the ruines of some ancient Monument, with the letters half eaten out, O Jupiter! what towings! what triumphs!"—ERASMUS, *Moriae Encomium*

<sup>2</sup> Huysmans, *The Cathedral*, chapter vii

## On Poetry and Appreciation

purples one really can call the *Lady of Shallott* "jewelled" and "glittering, or see in Milton the dusky magnificence of Rembrandt, or recognize the white purity, the chiselled outline of the *Strayed Raveller*. Each poem has its own exquisite beauty. What sense or story *Kubla Khan* contains matters not at all, what does matter is its strange evocative power, those incantations of sunless chasms and cedars and spray of moonshine—above all, the music of changing rhythms and the rapid, magnificent crescendo of the last ten lines. The secret of rhythm is deepest buried of all secrets. Walter de la Mare's *Epitaph* ("Here lies a most beautiful lady") is a poem which seems to me beyond criticism, full of a haunting, unanalysable sweetness. Here is no colour, no profundity of meaning. Here is only a simple thought, simply and most musically expressed. It is only after the twentieth reading that the poem begins to exercise over the mind its strange and inexplicable magic—a magic of rhythm, like the indefinable sweetness in some stray bars of Mozart. Soon enough one comes to tire of mere lilt in poetry—the dancing lilt of the *Runnible Stag*, or the marching lilt of the *War Song of the Saracens*. The very qualities which charm at a first reading come in the end soonest to weary us. But rhythm is a spell—a delicate cadence, faint as perfume. Long after the ringing and triumphant thunder of William Morris has become empty sound, those lines of Keats still retain their mysterious fascination

Ah, what can ail thee, Knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge is withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

Rhythm is there, to be perceived or ignored. No words can

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

add to it or spoil it. The intranslatable beauty of a mere magical combination of sounds is the mystery of poetry as of prose. There is a curious delight in the arrangement of words, even in the grammar of one sentence I remember from Doughty.

For what sanctity perceive they at Mecca<sup>2</sup> where, looking into the ark, they see but bubbles burst that seemed before pearls in Syria!—*Arabia Deserta*.

There, as in the speech of Aesop to Rhodope, is the beauty of sound, to which one is either alive or blind with a blindness no teaching has the power to alleviate. The same wizardry in the arrangement of words is part of the secret of great humour.

“Do you know,” said Mr Pecksniff, leaning over the banisters with an odd recollection of his familiar manner among new pupils at home, “that I should very much like to see Mrs Todger’s notion of a wooden leg, if perfectly agreeable to herself”—*Martin Chuzzlewit*, chapter ix

No mere effort of the imagination can make this funny, if it is not already recognized as funny. No comment can explain how it is that, if a single phrase is transposed, the whole charm of the passage has evaporated.

I would not suggest that rhythm is a kind of magical quality separable from meaning. In fact the words

Hoodly, Doodly, Doo!

seem to me inexpressibly mournful and rhythmic, or incredibly light and buoyant—or merely what they are—according to the tone in which they are pronounced. Rhythm is inseparable from the pictures that the meaning of the words arouses in the imagination. It is the melody that

## On Poetry and Appreciation

accompanies to its appropriate measures the visions of the mind.

But imagination, true and unsleeping is the only ally the poet demands in poems of colour and pictures. It can realize how the whole spirit of summer is treasured up and alive for ever in one verse of the *Ancient Mariner*

It ceased yet still the sails made on  
A pleasant noise till noon,  
A noise like of a hidden brook  
In the leafy month of June,  
That to the sleeping woods all night  
Singeth a quiet tune.

By the effort of picture-creation comes to childhood, or to any that have not lost their childhood, a full appreciation of such poems as the *Forsaken Merman* and the *Lady of Shalott*

Four grey walls and four grey towers  
Overlook a space of flowers,

or

And by the moon the reaper weary  
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,

or

All in the blue, unclouded weather  
Thick jewelled shone the saddle-leather  
The helmet and the helmet feather  
Burned like one burning flame together

Or there is Contrast—the secret of these lines from the *Ancient Mariner*

What loud uproar bursts from the door!  
The wedding guests are there.  
But in the garden-bower the bride  
And bridesmaids singing are—  
And hark, the little vesper bell  
That biddeth me to prayer!

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

The verse begins loudly, and gradually sinks into silence with the last very quiet and lovely couplet In Henley's *Margaritae Sorori*, the first line,

A late lark twitters from the quiet skies,

is full of short, rapid syllables and consonants. as twilight deepens, it changes to the full, grave rhythms of

There falls on the old, grey city  
An influence luminous and serene,  
A shining peace.

Repetition, too, is one of the inexplicable charms of poetry. "Yet a little sleepe, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleepe." It is akin to the fascination of the rhyme, the expected echo. The mere refrain is one of the most obvious and facile methods of appeal—perhaps too, one of the more dangerous. It is only the haunting cadence of "Two red roses across the moon," or "Binnorie, O Binnorie!" or,

See'st thou not where thy Venus lies,  
(*N'oserez-vous, mon bel ami?*)  
Love in heart and tears in eyes,  
(*Je vous en prie, pity me!*)  
(*N'oserez-vous, mon bel, mon bel,*  
*N'oserez-vous, mon bel ami!*)

that can support repetition But there is a subtler form—the cumulative echo of sound:

I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree,  
Beneath me in the valley waves the palm,  
Beneath, beyond the valley, breaks the sea,  
Beneath me sleep in mist and light and calm  
Cities of Lebanon, dream-shadow-dim,  
Where kings of Tyre and Kings of Tyre did rule  
In ancient days in endless dynasty . .

## *On Poetry and Appreciation*

But I will walk upon the wooded hill  
Where stands a grove, O pines, of sister pines,  
And when the downy twilight droops her wing  
And no sea glimmers, and no mountain shines  
My heart shall listen still.

And onomatopoeia, that time-worn device. Tennyson is the textbook of onomatopoeia

On heaps of ruin, hornless unicorns,  
Cracked basilisks and splintered cockatrices  
And shattered talbots.

Hammering and clinking chattering stony names  
Of shale and hornblende, rag and trap and tuff,  
Amygdaloid and trachyte, till the sun  
Grew broader toward his death and fell, and all  
The rosy heights came out above the lawns.

I cannot feel that

Stetit illa tremens utroque recusso  
Insonuere cavæ gemitumque dedere cavernæ

is any nearer genuine poetry than

The spires  
Pricked with incredible pinnacles into heaven.

But they are among some of the thousand things which are worth noticing and then passing on, not taking too serious heed.

All the talk in the world is useless if it remains only annotation of text. The function of criticism is creative it exists to waken appreciation, the guardian of the gate of beauty. A man who has a real love of Shelley or Shakespeare in him has gained something more than the reputation of a highbrow. He has added to existence enormous possessions



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

and delights; he has come one step nearer to the realization of mystery, to the understanding of the remoter stars. He is a lover, if he be only a lover of poetry: and for every thousand men of learning in the world there is only one such lover. He will find his imagination grow and broaden with years, that imagination which gives the keenest of all delights, and which can contemplate with a sort of divine ecstasy the humblest and meanest of things, which

with a Bird,  
Wren or Eagle, finds its way to  
All its instincts.

Imagination only means keeping alive to the end the knowledge we have as children of the loveliness of the ordinary—colour and scents and sound. Over the commonplace it shakes the spell which we call Romance. To what far fields does not the “Land of Nod, on the East of Eden” transport us? and what glamorous adventures of the mind are not recalled by such simplicity as this:

There were Giants in the earth in those daies and also after  
that, when the sonnes of God came in vnto the daughters of men,  
& they bare children to them the same became mighty men, which  
were of old, men of renown

It is only when we come to lose it that we realize what treasures are stored in the imagination, and that, lacking it, the most learned man in the world is empty as a coffin—as ponderous, as polished, and as depressing as the calf-bound volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The function of all education is not to teach in the sense of cramming a mind with knowledge that can never be more than half digested. It is to teach others the way to learn for themselves. Cramming, if it does not kill outright, stifles

## On Poetry and Appreciation

and warps the mind. All schoolmasters, I feel, should bear in mind that pleasant remark of a fifteenth-century Prioress of Sopwell

Ye shall onderstonde that thys is for to saye Yf a man lacke leche or medycyne he shal make thre thinges his leche and medycyne and he shal nede never no moo

The fyrste of hem is a mery thoght.

The seconde is *laboure not outraged*.

The thyrde is dyete measurable.<sup>1</sup>

No genuine teacher ever forgets that he is himself only an apprentice to his subject, a teacher by virtue of his love rather than his knowledge. And it is only his love for his subject that can awaken that enthusiasm which is a quality rarer than knowledge. The facts we gain at school are for the most part learnt to be forgotten. It is not the facts that matter, but the training and arduous labour of the mind to become sensitive to other than facts. For every hundred that enter the world equipped with a sound knowledge of Latin Grammar and Geometry, only one will go forth bearing in his brain the seeds of a love that is greater than wisdom. But to him life will be a richer and profounder mystery than to his fellows. He will have seen beyond, in broken glimpses, the bright turrets of Ilion. And if, it may be, the world turns its broad back on him, he will have something finer than the world in which to seek consolation. He will come to know and to love more dearly than he loves his fellows the visions of dead men and the ancient wisdom, the fountain where, under the thorn, Merlin lies asleep in the forests of Broceliande.

<sup>1</sup> *Treatyse of Fysshynge with an Angle.*



## APPENDICES



## APPENDIX 1

### LITERARY DEVICES

#### I THE SIMILE

A simile is not a simple comparison. To say, "Mr Tomkins has a voice as rich as Caruso's" is not a simile. To say that Mr Tomkins has a voice like melted butter is a simile, though not very fresh or original. A simile is a comparison between two things apparently unlike, yet possessing just those points in common which the writer wishes to illustrate. Thus, nothing is less likely to be mistaken for a ghost than a leaf but when Shelley writes

Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

he is comparing one aspect of the leaf (dancing and scurrying before the wind) to one aspect of a ghost (dancing and scurrying before the rod of the wizard). If the simile is original and yet inevitable, if it is not only fresh but also seems the aptest illustration, it adds enormously to vividness and clarity. Falstaff walks on to the stage, accompanied by a diminutive boy, and remarks

I do here walk before thee, like a sow that hath overwhelmed  
all her litter but one.

At once attention is drawn to their disparity in size, and a further emphasis given to Falstaff's no small resemblance to a sow. The best sentence in the prose works of Chaucer contains that simile.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

Eek the buttokes of hem faran as it were the hindre part of a she ape in the fulle of the moone <sup>1</sup>

Here the effect is facetious. but the simile is not strained too far. It has always seemed to me also to contain a touch of wild, elfin poetry.

Indeed, the simile belongs rightfully to poetry: and is common in such prose-poetry as Sidney's *Arcadia*, or the sermons of Jeremy Taylor, its chief value being pictorial. It can be used to convey colour to a sentence, as when, in *Jane Eyre*, birds on the hedges are compared to "single russet leaves that had forgotten to drop." Or it can be used to clarify or to heighten the poetic intensity of an idea:

... spill

Their thousand dangling wreaths of water-smoke,  
That, like a broken purpose, waste in air

Or it can, occasionally, be a poetic picture in itself, with little reference to the object it illustrates.

Pleasures, like schoolboys in a playground, had so trampled over his heart that nothing green could spring there, and, what passed over it, more heedless than children, left not even, as they, its name graven on the wall.

This simile from *Madame Bovary* is scarcely in place in prose. It is essentially and wholly poetic, a separate and individual picture

A good simile is not only apt, but new. If a simile is trite, it becomes a cliché "As white as snow," "as quick as lightning"—these are similes so trite that they have long since ceased to create a picture. If a simile is not apt as well as fresh it is a discord, sometimes deliberately facetious (as

<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*.

## Appendices

when O Henry speaks of a hot summer atmosphere resembling two eggs fried on both sides), otherwise it is unnecessary. The real danger in the use of the simile is the fact that it completely stops the action. It is therefore little help in narrative, and useful only in description, in writing which is static. There is an astonishingly vivid and vigorous simile in the eleventh book of *War and Peace*, no less than seventy four lines long. Tolstoy is trying to give a picture of Moscow deserted by the Russians. He does so by an exhaustive and elaborate analogy with a queenless hive. He is, for the time, writing pure description but meanwhile the narrative waits, no step advanced.

As an illustration used poetically the simile belongs not to prose. It belongs to grander realms. Only in moments of high poetic exaltation could men be made to speak of love as "the spirit of gone Eden haunting earth,"<sup>1</sup> or of a "deed as black as the old towers of Hell."<sup>2</sup> Only in poetry could occur the last magnificent words of David

*And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the Sunne riseth, even a morning, without cloudes as the tender grasse springing out of the earth by cleare shining after raine,*

or the lovely simile of the Children of Israel pitched before the Syrians in their tents, "like two little flockes of kids. Unless it is introduced with perfect taste and fitness, it is only a false glitter, tawdry. It becomes. Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver." Oscar Wilde was charmed by that simile, for

Beddoes, *Death's Jest Book*, II, II

Ibid., III, I.



## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

he uses it three times, altering it to a red rose when he applies it to Sybil Vane's blush. Yet it is much too complex and artificial to be good. A good simile, while containing a fresh picture, does not confuse but clarifies the original idea. When Mary Webb talks of "one white cloud, as if it were made of white narcissus or snowdrops, close-packed like market bunches of flowers,"<sup>1</sup> the very poetry of the simile confuses the idea of the cloud. When the simile is overdone, it becomes hectic, over-heated.

The amber flung out arms, as though it would embrace the whole world. The deep blue ebbed from the sea, was pale crystal, then from length to length, a vast bronze shield. The amber receded as though it had done its work, and myriads of little flecks of gold ran up into the pale blue-white, thousands of scattered fragments, like coins flung in some godlike largesse.

The bronze sea was held rigid as though it were truly of metal. The town caught the gold, and all the windows flashed.<sup>2</sup>

When the simile is inapt or untrue, it is simply intolerable poetic diction.

Does not his hair resemble a hyacinth flower?<sup>3</sup> and under his eyebrows his eyes brighten like burnished stones?<sup>3</sup> Who can be insensible to his damask cheek, to that red mouth furnished with teeth as white as ivory?<sup>3</sup>

Fashions in similes alter. A typical and beautiful simile of the older poets is Spenser's comparison of the hair of Britomart to a star "with flaming lockes dispred,"<sup>4</sup> or Shakespeare's comparison of Willie Hughes to a summer's

<sup>1</sup> Mary Webb, *Seven for a Secret*, chapter ix.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Walpole, *Portrait of a Man with Red Hair*, 1 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Daphnis and Chloe*, trs. by George Moore, Book IV.

<sup>4</sup> *Faerie Queene*, III 1 16.

## Appendices

day.<sup>1</sup> The simile was a comparison at once illuminating and grand.

Night, like a masque, hath entered Heaven's great hall,  
With thousand torches ushering her way

When Milton had the audacity to compare Satan to a barrel of gunpowder, or when Shakespeare spoke of the "blanket of the dark," the critics were either amused or horrified. Night's candles are burnt out. To the eighteenth century it was near bathos to compare stars to candles, though "correct enough to compare one's mistress's eyes to stars. Butler's

like a lobster boiled, the morn  
From black to red began to turn

was intended to be purely facetious. But suppose Edith Sitwell had said that? She did, actually, in a rather grim and wholly serious poem, compare dawn to a

Grease that slowly forms a thin  
And foul white film,

as Noyes compared it to a man's bloodshot eyes. It is a sudden return to the *marinades* and burlesques of Scarron, one rule of which was to use the homeliest and least dignified of words in order to make the realism complete. The moderns prefer to compare the great with the small, the dignified with the humdrum,

Than to compare, as ye have done,  
To match the candle with the sun.

We are making now, by means of the simile, enormous use of the deliberate anticlimax in poetry. So vanish conven-

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

tions! No more oranges, "like golden lamps in a green night"· but

The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun

Like the old pastoral conventions, it is considered just as false to compare, for example, the muscles on a man's arm to the ripples on a brook, or someone's handwriting on an envelope to ears of corn in a high wind, as Tennyson did, as it would be to write in the conventions of *Lycidas*, with Cambridge undergraduates winding their horns and driving sheep. We feel in it a falseness to Nature. Shelley, in an elaborate ode, addresses Keats as one ineffectual angel to another. Adonais, who grew like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished, and fed with true love tears instead of dew. But we remember Adonais climbing Skiddaw with four glasses of rum and whisky inside him, or fighting a butcher twice his size. . . .

Whether there is anything in this altered attitude except an inevitable reaction, it is hard to say. Perhaps the real change that has come upon poetry is an impatience with anything that tries to sublimate reality. So we go down the scale instead of up—and where the proud humility of Blake would have seen all the morning stars singing together in an apple-tree, we turn the sun itself only into an apple of gold.

### 2 THE METAPHOR

The metaphor is a much bolder figure than the simile. It expresses resemblance without using the sign of comparison. Swift once said to Young, pointing to a tree that had been struck by lightning, "I shall be like that tree, I shall die at

## Appendices

the top. If he had said, 'I am a tree, dying from the branches down,' he would have compressed the simile into a metaphor. For metaphors are compressed similes and, like similes, are only excusable if they fit in with the atmosphere. They are of the same group as analogies and, like all analogies, however picturesque they may be, they always contain a certain vagueness and lack of logic.

The metaphor, even more than the simile, is the property of the poet. It is found elsewhere only in prose of an emotional type, in prose which has usurped the functions of poetry. If it is not poetical, it is facetious and strained, as it is so often in the works of Dickens. Its function is illustration or decoration, and necessarily (like the simile) it holds up the progress of narrative. Like the simile also it is therefore out of place in anything but descriptive prose. Its chief weakness is that most metaphors tend to make a picture not more vivid but more vague, blurred, confused. Sometimes, used in a single sentence, it flashes a sudden beauty—'Love, the white everlasting that flowers in simple places', 'Our old Grandmother Dust. Often it is a passage of pure poetry, as in a very lovely description of dawn in Chesterton's *Flying Inn*.

It flung faintly across the broad foliage a wan and pearly light, far more mysterious than the lost moonshine. It seemed to enter all the doors and windows of the woodland, pale and silent but confident, like men that keep a tryst. Soon its white robes had threads of gold and scarlet and the name of it was Morning.

It is when a metaphor becomes overstrained or too elaborate that it drags in so many pictures that the main impression is blurred.

How the succeeding terms pass by, slowly, monotonously

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

an endless Goods Train, with the same letters on every truck, and cacophonous disharmony of wheels! Now and then something happens—a pig falls on the line wrong signals are given the guard curses the engine driver, the engine driver curses the stoker But the train never stops The train never stops—till, jolting to an uneasy quiescence, it reaches the station, unlades its dishevelled cargo, and then stands empty till the time for its next long, weary journey shall again return

### 3 PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a development of the Pathetic Fallacy, not merely giving human characteristics to objects, but deliberately investing them with a life and individuality of their own Old Mother Earth, Father Sol, and the rest . . . “In the time that the morning did strow roses and violets in the heavenly floor against the coming of the Sun”—such a sentence is typical of the whole of the *Arcadia*, a book which Personification raises into the realms of poetry for it is a book to be read lingeringly, as a series of pictures like the *Faerie Queene*, with a plot too complicated for anyone but a mathematician or a literary historian to unravel It is a sentimental trick, an outworn device, perhaps even a refined survival of animism One might say that the philosophy of savages has become the ornament of civilization, for it is the usual fate of the religions of one age to become either the laughing-stocks or the poetry of the next

But personification is in the realm of poetry To the poet every sleep and every awakening is still an adventure the dragons are yet in the path, and the old gods behind the skies, and to call them gods and dragons is only the more to recognize life as an adventure.

## Appendices

### 4. ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia, the illustration of sense by sound, is still a common device. There are two usual forms. There is what Max Müller called the "Bow-Wow" theory—to which belong such alliterated reduplications as "click-clack, ding-dong" (imitative), and "chit-chat" or "shilly-shally" (derivative). More subtle is the use of rhyming onomatopoeia— "clap-trap," "higgledy piggledy" (imitative), and "hocus-pocus" or "tit bit" (derivative). Or there is the imitation of the sense of a phrase by a photographic sound

The lulling, mazy, coralline roar  
Of numberless caverns filled with singing seas.<sup>1</sup>

This form of onomatopoeia is wholly out of place in prose. It creates sound pictures—nor is it very difficult to do. In fact, I feel sure that, if Tennyson happened to have written such a line as "whales wallowing in billowy ocean-troughs," I might have quoted it in this book as yet another example of his supreme mastery of technique and compared it with Milton's whales, wallowing unwieldy, enormous in their gait."

But there are numberless words in every language which, without any direct imitation, *suggest* an emotion by their sound.

MORS. And what does MORS mean? inquired that oddly indolent voice in the quiet. "Was it his name, or his initials, or is it a charm?"

"It means—well, sleep," I said. "Or nightmare, or dawn, or nothing, or—it might mean everything." I confess, though, that to my ear it had the sound at that moment of an enormous breaker, bursting on the shore of some unspeakably remote island—and we two marooned.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. J. Turner

<sup>2</sup> W. de la Mare, *Ding Dong Bell*.

## *Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation*

This form of onomatopoeia is the subtle reflection of sound by the use of evocative words, words that seem appropriate for no analysable reason to the meanings behind them

Two centuries of the play of the sea-wind were in the velvet of the mosses which lay along its inaccessible ledges and angles. Here and there the marble plates had slipped from their places where the delicate weeds had forced their way.<sup>1</sup>

The place where he stood waved drowsily with strange flowers, heavy with perfume, dripping with odours. Gloomy and nameless weeds, not to be found in Mentzelius. Huge moths, so richly winged they must have banqueted upon tapestries and royal stuffs, slept on the pillars that flanked either side of the gateway, and the eyes of all the moths remained open, and were burning and bursting with a mesh of veins.<sup>2</sup>

In the first of these passages there is something "pensive, spell-bound, and but half-real, something cloistral and monastic", and the atmosphere is created deliberately by the sound and rhythm, as the sombreness of the second is born of such words as drowsily, Mentzelius, perfume, gloomy, nameless weeds, royal stuffs, *burning* and *bursting* with a *mesh* of veins.

### 5 ALLITERATION

Akin to this form of Onomatopoeia, and also a method in the creation of atmosphere, is the device known as Alliteration, the repetition of sound in a sentence. This we cannot wholly escape: it is a legacy from Anglo-Saxon, and an inalienable heritage of the language. More often it is a vice than a virtue. It is effective in paradox.

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<sup>1</sup> Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*

<sup>2</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill*

## Appendices

But with the dog and the rose this instinctive principle is reversed. With them we think of the artificial as the archetype; the earthborn as the erratic exception.<sup>1</sup>

Here alliteration lends point. When there is no point, it becomes intolerably monotonous

Thou wishest to be in the country with thy distaff rather than to continue in the court with thy delights. Housewifery in the country is as much praised as honour in the courts. We think it as great mirth to sing psalms as you melody to chant sonnets.<sup>2</sup>

And when the alliteration is not only pointless but accidental, it is infuriating, as in the line: Safe from sloth and sensual snare, unless the hissing of the Old Serpent is intended to be represented. All arts express a pattern. Language weaves it of sound, and the loveliest passages in prose depend largely for their effect upon assonance and alliteration. The vowel demands to be repeated the consonant demands to be repeated, and both cry aloud to be perpetually varied. You may follow the adventures of a letter through any passage that has particularly pleased you.<sup>3</sup> This is not to be learnt except by the intuitions of an ear long trained, but quite unconsciously the writer will know that hard vowels express contempt, long vowels melancholy, the frequent use of *w* desolation and emptiness

In all his wayes through this wide worlde s wave<sup>4</sup>

or

Old, unwandered, waste ways of the world.<sup>5</sup>

It is a matter of unconscious rhythm—the instinctive desire to be apt.

<sup>1</sup> G. K. Chesterton.

<sup>2</sup> John Lyly

<sup>3</sup> R. L. Stevenson, *Contemporary Review* April 1885

<sup>4</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* L. x. 34

<sup>5</sup> Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, I 751



## APPENDIX II

### EXAMPLES OF PROSE RHYTHM

RHYTHM is present in all the extracts quoted below, the majestic or delicate, dignified or evanescent spirit of music:

Why should'st thou then care whether thy days be many or few, which, when prolonged to the uttermost, prove, paralleled with eternity, as a tear is to the ocean? To die young is to do that soon, which once thou must do, it is but the giving over of a game that, after never so many hazards, must be lost —WILLIAM DRUMMOND, *A Cypress Grove*

All this has happened without any apparent previous change in the general circumstances which had brought on their distress. The death of a man at a critical juncture, his disgust, his retreat, his disgrace, have brought innumerable calamities on a whole nation. A common soldier, a child at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune and almost of nature —EDMUND BURKE.

And since death must be the *Lucina* of life, and even Pagans could doubt whether thus to live were to die; since our longest sun sets at right descensions, and makes but winter arches, and therefore it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and have our light in ashes, since the brother of death daily haunts us with dying mementoes, and time that grows old in itself, bids us hope no long duration,—diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation —SIR THOMAS BROWNE

And I believe that billions of years hence, billions and billions of years hence, I shall be sitting in the same room where I sit now, writing the same lines that I am now writing. I believe that again a few years later my ashes will swing in the moveless and silent depths of the Pacific Ocean, and that the same figures, the

## Appendices

same nymphs and the same fauns will dance around me again  
—GEORGE MOORE.

They lay slumbering in a grave crystal light which lapped,  
deep as the Tuscarora Trough, above and around their prodigious  
stone plates, or slats or slabs or laminæ their steep slopes washed  
by the rarified atmosphere of their site, and in hue of a hoary green  
—WALTER DE LA MARE.

Repentance is a redemption from Egyptian thralldom, a deliver-  
ance from the prisons of Hell a grinding of the old Adam even  
unto dust and powder —RICHARD HOOKER.

The contemplation of God and Heaven is a kind of burial and  
Sepulchre and rest of the Soul and in this death of rapture and  
ecstasy in this death of the contemplation of my interest in my  
Saviour, I shall find myself and all my sins interred and entombed  
in His wounds, and like a lily in Paradise, out of the red earth  
I shall see my soul rise out of His blade in a candour and in an  
innocence contrasted there, acceptable in the sight of His father  
—JOHN DOYNE.

It appears in the heats and forwardnesses of new converts,  
which are like to the great emissions of lightning or like huge  
fires, which flame and burn without measure even all that they  
can till from flames they descend to still fires, and thence to  
smoke, from smoke to embers, and from thence to ashes cold  
and pale like ghosts or the fantastic images of death.—JEREMY  
TAYLOR.

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly  
through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their  
last end, upon all living and the dead.—JAMES JOYCE.



# INDEX

- Addison, Joseph, on Imagination, 26
- Adjectives, 54-55, 182-185
- Adlastrop, 39
- Adonais 192, 268
- Advantages of Having One Leg 30, 31
- Aesop and Rhodope, 254
- Ainsworth, Harrison, 63
- A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, 138
- Alchemist, The*, 66
- Alice in Wonderland*, 36, 101 168, 194, 200
- Allingham, William, 138, 220
- Alliteration, 272-273
- All Our Yesterdays* 94
- Alpha of the Plough*, see Gardner A. G.
- Alphonso of Arragon, 205
- Alton Locke*, 81 240
- Anatomy of Melancholy The*, 29 197
- Ancient Mariner The*, 191 192, 235 247 248, 255 256
- Anna Karenina*, 144, 200
- Anticlimax, 111-114
- Anti Jacobin, The*, 224
- Antony and Cleopatra*, 43
- Arabia Deserta*, 254
- Arcadia, The*, 264, 270
- Aristophanes, 117-118
- Aristotle, 29 173
- Arlen, Michael, 139
- Arnold, Matthew 82, 111; defines Poetry 219
- As Was Were* 53
- Austen, Jane, 52, 100
- Autumn (Clare)* 243
- Bacon, Francis, 27 28, 29-31 44, 62, 64, 210
- Barbellion, W N P., 163-164
- Barclay Alexander 48, 201 202
- Bard The*, 80, 183
- Baring, Maurice, 172
- Barric, Sir J M., 134
- Bashkirtseff Marie, 72-73
- Bassano, Jacopo, 93
- Bates, Miss 100
- Bathos, see Anticlimax
- Beardale Aubrey 272
- Beddoes Mrs.*, 87 \*
- Beddoes, T L., 265
- Beerbohm, Max, 82, 101, 225
- Beggar's Opera, The*, 67
- Bennett, Arnold, 74, 91-92, 115 on plots, 137-138 164, 226
- Benson, E. F., 53
- Bentley Richard, 210
- Berners, Juliana, 259
- Bierce, Ambrose, 138, 144, 147-148 166
- Birds Beasts and Flowers*, 228
- Blake, William, 11 on Imagination, 19 24, 85 227 235 268
- Bliff* 152
- Blunden, Edmund, 230
- Book of Eugenia for Ladies*, 68-69
- Book of Songs* Dowland's, 178
- Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry* 44
- Borrow George, 79

# Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

- Boswell, James, 51, 67, 129, 131  
*Boy*, 97-98  
*Bramble, Tabitha*, 106, 107  
*Breck, Alan*, 153  
 Bridges, Robert, 33  
 Brooke, Rupert, 35, 36  
*Brothers Karamazoff, The*, 117  
 Browne, Sir Thomas, 37, 51,  
     on Laughter, 113, 171, 172,  
     174, 274  
 Browning, Robert, 74, 75, 192,  
     226, 273  
*Bryan and Pereene*, 218  
 Buffoonery, 108  
*Bull, The*, 194  
 Bunyan, John, 68, 78, 146, 175  
 Burke, Edmund, 43, 274  
 Burney, Fanny, 100-101  
 Burton, Robert, 62, on reading,  
     197, 210  
 Butler, Samuel (1612-1680), 267  
 Butler, Samuel (1835-1902), 127,  
     on Bunyan, 175  
*By Ends*, 68  
 Byron, Lord, 43  
  
*Cabala*, 82  
 Cabell, James, 83  
 Calverley, C S, 113, 192  
*Canterbury Tales, The*, 102-103,  
     119, 205  
*Caravan*, 143  
 Carew, Thomas, 226  
*Cargoes*, 177  
*Carker, Mr*, 152  
 Carlyle, Jane, 130  
 Carlyle, Thomas, 138, defines  
     Poetry, 219  
*Carnival*, 97, 145  
 Carroll, Lewis, *see* Dodgson, C L  
*Castle of Otranto*, 118  
  
*Cathédrale, La*, 87-88, 252  
 Cézanne, Paul, 216  
*Chadband, Mr*, 151  
 Chapman, George, 174, 191  
 Character Drawing, 150-155  
*Charles O'Malley*, 118  
 Chaucer, Geoffrey, 19, 20, 21,  
     103, 119, 209, 220, simile in,  
     263, 264  
 Chesterfield, Lord, 130  
 Chesterton, G K, 15, 28, 30, 31,  
     35, 83, 96, 102, 158, 167,  
     parodies of, 193, metaphor  
     in, 269, alliteration in, 273  
 Clare, John, 226, 243  
 Classics, *The*, 204-205  
*Clayhanger*, 74  
*Cloud*, Criticism of Shelley's,  
     248-249  
 Clough, A H, 174  
 Coleridge, S T, 22, on words,  
     51, 54, on Johnson's *London*,  
     66, 139, 234, 235, 255  
*Collation, La*, 75, 76  
*Collins, Mr*, 100  
 Colloquialism, 69-72  
 Colour in prose, 84-85, in  
     poetry, 252, 253, 255  
 Congreve, William, 157  
*Conquest of Granada*, 193  
 Conrad, Joseph, 154  
 Construction, in essays, 40-43,  
     in narrative, 140-148  
 Contrast, 74-77, 255, 256  
 Corelli, Marie, 97-98  
*Country of the Blind, The*, 37,  
     139, 164  
*Course of Time, The*, 176  
 Cowper, William, on letter-  
     writing, 120, 122, letters of,  
     125-126, 132-133, on verse-

# Index

- writing, 181 poetry of, 235-238
- Crashaw R., 222, 227
- Crewe, Sir Ranulphe, 221
- Cummings, E. E., 243
- Curtiss, 79-80
- Cypress Grove, 19, 274
- Daedalus*, Stephen, 81
- Dandies and Dandies* 82
- Daphnis and Chloe*, 266
- Darwin*, Charles 222
- David Copperfield*, 116, 145
- Davies, W. H., 166
- Da Vinci, 85
- De Amicitia*, 30
- Debts and Credits* 96
- De Bury Richard, 115 196, 202, 203
- Defence of Poetry* 173
- Defoe, Daniel, 90
- De Hooch, Pieter 75-76
- De la Mare, W., 45 46, 57 95 182, 184, 224 *The Listeners* 249-251 253 271 275
- De Quincey T., 28 on Joan of Arc, 60 81 234
- Description, 86-98, 161-167
- De Tabley Lord, 183
- Dialogue, 155-161
- Dickens, Charles, 17 52, 72, 92, 99 106, 110, 116, 118, 134, 153 157 207 254, 269
- Ding Dong Bell*, 271
- Dissident Return d*, 226
- Doctor Faustus* 251
- Dodgson, C. L., 61 117 129, 194
- Dodsworth, Mrs., 61
- Dogberry 104
- Dombey and Son*, 71 134
- Dombey and Son*, 152
- Don Armado*, 104-105 152
- Donne, John, 226, 229, 275
- Don Quixote*, 48 112, 143, 158-159 212, 234
- Doughty C. M., 254
- Dream of Eugene Aram*, 102
- Drink to Me Only* 230
- Drummond of Hawthornden, William, 19, 274
- Dryden, John, 12, 43, 192, 193
- Duval, Madame*, 101
- Dyer, John, 111
- Earlham*, 90-91
- Ebb-Tide, The*, 58, 156
- Echoes of Memory* 61
- Elegy on the Death of an Unfortunate Lady* 227
- Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, 77 183
- Eliot, George, 69, 70 on *Don Quixote*, 234
- Elliot, Anna*, 100
- El Samet*, 119
- Elton, Mrs.*, 100
- Emphasis, 70-71
- Epitaph (De la Mare)*, 253
- Erasmus, 252
- Eric, or Little by Little*, 23 59, 135 207
- Essays*, beginnings of, 27-28, 43-47 ideas for 31-37; arrangement of, 37-43 revision of, 48-85
- Essays in Criticism*, 82
- Essays of Elia*, 37
- Essay on Finger Posts*, 40-41
- Essay on Masques and Triumphs*, 30

# Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

- Essay on Superstitions*, 47  
*Esmond*, 134  
*Esther Waters*, 214  
*Euclid*, 131  
*Eumuloe*, 104-105  
*Euphemism*, 72-74  
*Euphues*, 101  
*Euripides*, 82  
*Evalina*, 100-101  
*Evans, Sir Hugh*, 104  
*Evelyn, John*, 22  
*Everlasting Mercy, The*, 194  
*Everyman in His Humour*, 115  
*Exaggeration*, 109-110
- Facts, 24-25, 148-149  
*Faerie Queene, The*, 270, 273  
*Falstaff*, 103, 109, 157, 159, 211, 263  
*Familiar Letters (Howell)*, 130-131  
*Farrar, Dean*, 59  
*Feathernest, Mr*, 218-219  
*Fielding, Henry*, 73, 105, 106  
*Firbank, Ronald*, 82  
*FitzGerald, Edward*, 121, 122, letters of, 126, 128  
*Flaming Heart, The*, 227  
*Flecker, James Elroy*, 252  
*Flint, F S*, 230  
*Flying Inn, The*, 269  
*Foote, Samuel*, 185  
*Ford, Mrs*, 109  
*Forsaken Garden, The*, 223  
*Forsaken Merman*, 255  
*Forsyte Saga*, 137, 145  
*Forsyte, Soames*, 137, 162, 163  
*Frankenstein*, 79  
*Frith, W P*, 20  
*Froggy's Little Brother*, 134  
*Fugitive Pieces*, 61
- Funeral (Donne)*, 226  
*Furlong, Atherton*, 61
- Galsworthy, John*, 162-165  
*Gamp, Mrs*, 105, 109, 157  
*Garden of Proserpine*, 223  
*Gardiner, A G*, 28, 40-41, 42, 47, 87, 175  
*Gauguin, Paul*, 117, 242  
*Gay, John*, 237  
*Generalization*, 63-65  
*Gentleman from America, The*, 139-140  
*Gibson, W W*, 33  
*Gil Blas*, 200  
*Gissing, G*, 92, 161  
*Godwin, William*, 12  
*Goldsmith, Oliver*, 43  
*Good Companions, The*, 45  
*Gone to Earth*, 96-97, 152  
*Granger, James*, 68  
*Grantly, Archdeacon*, 208, 218  
*Graves, Robert*, 243  
*Gray, Thomas*, 77, 80, 118, 121, letters of, 129, 183  
*Greek Anthology*, 109  
*"Green Soap,"* 133, 134  
*Gregory of Nanzianus, St.*, 126  
*Gulliver's Travels*, 56-57
- Half Holiday*, 92  
*Hamlet*, 13, 203, 227, 234  
*Hardy, Thomas*, 38, 228, 229  
*Harry Bailly*, 102-103  
*Harte, Bret*, 194  
*Haydon, B R*, 216  
*Hazlitt, William*, 21, 63, on the Grand Style, 67, 160, 196, 206  
*Henley, W E*, 256  
*Henry, O*, 265  
*Henry the Fourth*, 109, 211

# Index

- Heraclitus* 191  
*Herrick, R.*, 191 215  
*Historie of the Worlde*, 60  
*Hobbes, Thomas*, 22  
*Hogarth, William*, 21  
*Holmes, O W* 67  
*Hood, T.*, 220  
*Horace*, 190  
*Horne, R. H.*, 220, 221  
*House in Dormer Forest, The*, 84  
*House of Life, The* 172  
*Housman, A. E.*, 243  
*Howell, James*, 130, 131  
*How Sleep the Brave?* 80  
*Humour* 99-119  
*Humphry Clunker* 106-107  
*Huxley Aldous*, 92  
*Huymans, J K.*, 87-88, 91 252  
*Hydrotaphia*, 174, 274  
  
*Il Penseroso* 55  
*Imaginary Conversations* 84  
*Imlac*, 112-113  
*Importance of Being Earnest, The*  
 108  
*In Chancery* 163  
*Indian Summer of a Forsyte*, 137  
*In Memoriam* 111  
*Innocence of Father Brown, The*,  
 83  
*Interim*, 94, 154  
*Invisible Man, The* 144  
*Irony* 76-77  
*Isaiah, Book of* 83  
*Ivanovitch, Uvar* 19  
  
*Jacobs, W W.*, 116  
*Jacob's Room*, 93  
*James, G P R.*, 63  
*James, Henry* 138  
*Jane Eyre*, 264  
  
*Jenkins, Winifred* 106-107  
*Jeremy* 122  
*Jerome, Jerome K.*, 83 84  
*Jerrold, Douglas*, 118  
*Joan of Arc*, 60  
*Job Book of* 80  
*John Barrens's Watch*, 147-148  
*John Gilpin*, 237-238, 252  
*Johnsonese*, 65-69, 110  
*Johnson, Samuel*, 25, 27 29 on  
 Imagination, 51 on the *Beg-  
 gar's Opera*, 67 68, 112, 113  
 letters of 129 131 on books,  
 203; on Poetry 219 221 on  
*Lyctas* 240  
*Jollifant, Imigo* 45  
*Jonson, Ben*, 66, 115 on poetry  
 219, 227  
*Jorrocks Mr.*, 110  
*Joseph Andrews* 105-106  
*Joshua, Book of* 138  
*Joubert, Joseph*, 67 70, 217  
*Jourdain, M.*, 12  
*Journal of a Disappointed Man*,  
 163-164  
*Journal of Maria Bashkirstoff*  
 72-73  
*Journals of William Allingham*, 52  
*Journal to Stella*, 128-129  
*Joyce, James*, definition of Rhythm,  
 81 275  
*Jurgen*, 83  
  
*Keats in Babbs Land*, 194  
*Keats, John*, 11 33 34, 43 57  
 121 122, 183 215 216 on  
 Poetry 224-225 226 229,  
 241 252, 253 254, 268  
*Keene, Charles*, 118  
*Kidnapped*, 80  
*King Lear* 38, 78, 220



# Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

- Kipling, Rudyard, 96  
*Kipps*, 200  
*Koran, The* (Sterne)), 100  
*Kubla Khan*, 191, 253  
  
*La Belle Dame Sans Mercy*, 191  
*Lady of Shallott*, 253, 255  
 Larderism, 225-226  
*L'Allegro*, 55, 177  
 Lamb, Charles, 22, 27, 37, 44,  
     62, 70, 108, 121 letters of,  
     37, on reading, 197, 206  
 Landor, W S, 84, 254  
 Lang, Andrew, 191  
 Latimer, Hugh, 146  
*Lavengro*, 79, 200, 205  
 Lawrence, D H, 228  
 Lear, Edward, 105, 117, 186-187  
*Leo Hunter, Mrs*, 116  
 Letters, consolation, 78, the  
     writing of, 120-134  
*Letters of Junius*, 77  
*Letter to Lord Chesterfield*, 68  
*Lewis Arundel*, 118  
 Library, the, 198, 202  
*Life and Death of Mr Badman*,  
     146  
*Life of Bampfylde Moore-Carew*,  
     165  
*Ligeia*, 80, 144  
*Lionizing*, 115  
*Listeners, The*, 249-251  
 Literary Devices, 74-75, 263-273  
*Lives of the Poets* (Johnson), 68  
 Longfellow, H W, 234  
 Longinus, 224  
*Lorna Doone*, 84  
*Love's Labour's Lost*, 38, 104  
 Lubbock, Percy, 90-91  
 Lucas, E V, 108, 194  
*Lycidas*, 240, 268  
  
 Lyly, John, 273  
*Lysis*, 209  
  
 Macaulay, Lord, 28, 29, 30, 77  
*Macbeth*, 62, 112, 224, 251  
 Mackenzie, Compton, 97, 145  
*Madame Bovary*, 144, 200, 264  
 Maginn, William, 192  
*Malaprop, Mrs*, 104, 107-108  
 Malapropism, 102-108, 112  
 Mansfield, Katherine, 127  
*Man Who Lost Himself, The*,  
     155  
*Margaritae Sorori*, 256  
*Marius the Epicurean*, 272  
*Mark Rutherford's Deliverance*,  
     53-54  
*Marston, Edward*, 152  
*Martin Chuzzlewit*, 109, 113, 200,  
     254  
*Martyrdom of St Sebastian*  
     (Pollauuolo), 86  
*Martyrdom of Man*, 70-71  
 Masefield, John, 194  
*Masque of the Red Death*, 137  
*Meisterstinger Overture*, 172  
*Melincourt*, 218-219  
 Mencken, H L, 223, 224  
*Merry Wives of Windsor*, 109  
 Metaphor, 268-270  
 Metre, 176-180  
 Meynell, Alice, 249  
 Millet, François, 20, 191  
*Mill on the Floss*, 145, 210  
 Milton, John, 43, 50, 77, 83,  
     bathos in, 113-114, 118, 223,  
     229, 253, 267, 271  
*Modern Comedy, A*, 146  
*Moll Flanders*, 56  
 Montaigne, Michael de, 28, 251  
 Moore, George, 266, 274, 275

# Index

- Morias Encomium*, 252  
 Morris, William, 173  
 Mot Juste, The, 54-58  
*Mourning Bride, The*, 62  
*Mowing* (Frost), 176  
*Mr Blatworthy on Rampole Island* 57  
*Mr Polly*, 108, 144, 150, 151  
 Müller Max, 271  
*Munchausen, Baron*, 109  
*Mungle, The*, 186-188  
  
 Narrative, The writing of, 135-170  
 Neologisms, 114-116  
 Newton, Sir Isaac, 219  
*Nicholas Nickleby*, 153 157  
*Nickleby Ralph*, 157  
*Nightmare Abbey* 115  
*Nod*, 182  
 Nonsense, 116-117 in verse, 185-189  
*Northanger Abbey* 52, 100  
 Noyes, Alfred, 267  
  
 Observation, 15-26  
*Ode to Autumn*, 216  
*Ode to a Grecian Urn*, 252  
*Ode to Leuconoë*, 190  
*Ode to the Nightingale*, 194, 216, 241  
*Old English Baron, The*, 67  
 "Old Inevitable," 72, 74  
*Old Ships, The*, 252  
*Old Wives Tale, The*, 91-92  
 Onions, Oliver 168  
*On Mowing* (Gardiner) 175  
 Onomatopoeia, 157 271 272  
*Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, 78  
*Orton*, 220, 221  
  
 Osborne, Dorothy on Johnsonese, 65-66 on letter writing, 120, 121 on verse, 171  
*Othello*, 143 152-153 233  
*Our Mutual Friend*, 116-117  
*Outcast of the Islands*, 154  
  
 Pain, Barry 79-80  
*Palace of Art, The*, 161-162  
*Pargandson, The*, 185  
*Paradise Lost*, 113 118, 210, 220, 223 227  
 Parody 191-195  
 Passive, Use of, 64  
*Parson Letters* 130  
 Paston, Margaret, 130  
 Pater Walter (allusion from *Aesthetic Poetry Appreciations* 1889) 16 21 132, 226, 272  
 Pathos, 134  
*Patterns, Sir Willoughby* 90, 91  
*Pickwick Papers*, 52, 72, 99, 110, 150, 200  
*Picture of Dorian Gray The*, 78, 85 159-160  
*Pied Piper of Hamelin, The*, 74, 75  
*Pilgrim's Progress*, 68, 175  
 Peacock, T L., 101 108 face-dousness in, 115 defines Poetry 218, 219  
*Packnuff Mr.*, 119, 254  
*Penitas Les* (Joubert) 67 70, 217  
*Peregrine Pickle*, 200-201  
 Personification, 270  
*Peter and Wendy* 134  
*Phalobkion*, 115 202, 203  
 Plato, 209, 221  
*Pleasant Comedie of Patient Grusel*, 105

# Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

- Pobble, The*, 186  
 Poe, Edgar, 80, 82, humour of,  
     114-115, stories of, 144, 155,  
     194, poetry of, 223, 224  
*Poetics, The*, 29  
 Poetic Diction, 51, 229  
 Poetry, 173-176, 213-259  
 Pollaiuolo, Antonio, 86  
 Pope, Alexander, 220, 227  
 Priestley, J B, 45  
*Prince Otto*, 96  
 Prior, Matthew, 237  
*Progress of Two*, 165  
*Proudie, Mrs*, 218  
 Proust, Marcel, 138  
 "Psychopressionism," 244-246  
*Punch*, 108, 118  
  
*Quickly, Mrs*, 103-104  
 Quotation, 62-63, 114  
  
 Rabelais, Dr Francis, 117  
*Rahab*, 138  
 Raleigh, Sir Walter (1552-1618),  
     60  
 Raleigh, Sir Walter (1861-1922),  
     123-124  
*Rasselas*, 112-113  
*Raven*, 115  
 Reade, Winwood, 70-71  
 Reading, 196-212  
 Reeve, Clara, 67  
*Rehearsal, The*, 112, 193  
 Repetition in verse, 256-257  
 Restraint, 77-81  
 Reynolds, Sir Joshua, 68  
 Rhetoric, 59-60  
 Rhyme, 180  
 Rhythm, in prose, 81-84, 274-  
     275, in verse, 253-255  
  
 Richardson, Dorothy, 94, 154  
*Richard the Second*, 76  
*Richard Yea and Nay*, 44  
*Ring and the Book, The*, 226, 273  
*Robinson Crusoe*, 56, 200, 236  
 Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 182, on  
     translation, 189-190  
*Ruins of Rome, The*, 111  
*Runnable Stag, The*, 253  
 Ruskin, John, 102, 240  
*Ruth, Book of*, 221  
  
 Sainte-Beuve, C A, 222  
*Salome*, 265  
*Sancho Panza*, 105  
 Santayana, G, 219  
*Satyricon*, 181  
 Scarron, Paul, 267  
*Schoolmistress, The*, 112  
 Schopenhauer, Arthur, 25, 78  
 Scott, Sir W, 46, 207  
*Scythrop*, 115  
*Seuthenyn*, 108, 119  
 Selection, 37-41, 88-90  
 Selkirk, Alexander, 236  
*Selwyn, Mrs*, 100-101  
*Sentimental Tommy*, 53  
*Sermon on the Plough*, 146  
 Shakespeare, William, 25, 43, 54,  
     57, 76, 90, malapropisms in,  
     103-104, 109, 118, 143, 159,  
     172, 177, 184, 199, 203, 210,  
     211, 218, 224, 225, 233-234,  
     241, 251, similes in, 266, 267  
 Shand, Morton, 21  
 Shelley, P B, 82, on Poetry,  
     173, 197, 219, 221, *The*  
     *Cloud*, 248-249, similes in,  
     263, on Keats, 268  
 Shelley, Mrs (Mary Wollstone-  
     craft Godwin), 79

# Index

- Shelvocke, Captain, 191  
 Shenstone, William, 112, 196  
*Sherlock Holmes* 35 88  
*Ships of Fools* 201-202  
 Short Story definition of, 136-  
   137 plots, 137-140 Ideas  
   for 140-143 climax, 146-  
   148 character-drawing, 150-  
   155; "spoof-endings," 167-  
   168  
 Sidney Sir Philip, 264  
*Silence, A Fable*, 82  
*Silver, Long John*, 153  
*Silver Spoon The* 163  
*Smile*, 263-268  
*Simplicity* 77-81 180-181  
 Sincerity 22, 23 217-218  
 Sitwell, Edith, 185 267  
 Sitwell, Osbert, 155  
*Skiz, The*, 192-193 194  
*Slipslop Mrs.*, 105-106  
*Smallways Bert*, 150  
 Smith, Sydney 130  
 Smollett, Tobias, 106-107  
 Snobbery Literary 208-209  
*Sower The* (Miller), 20, 191  
 Spenser Edmund, on Patrons,  
   64 266, 273  
*Spartan Haunts the Year's Last*  
   *Hours A*, 179, 180  
*Squeers, Mr.*, 25 92; description  
   of 153  
 Squire, J. C., 34  
*Stelling Rev Mr.*, 25 210  
 Sterne, Laurence, 16, 83 on  
   Wit, 100 117 143-144  
 Stevenson, R. L., 13, 14, 49, 58  
   80, 96 on letter-writing, 120  
   153 156 on alliteration, 273  
*Strayed Reveller The* 252, 253  
 Stuart, Muriel, 230  
*Sugar Cane The* 68  
 Swift, Jonathan, 37, 55-57 58,  
   59 61 117 on letter writing,  
   121 letters of 128-129 on  
   books, 206 268, 269  
 Swinburne, A. C., 131; parodied  
   by Chesterton, 193; 223 224,  
   235  
 Tabb, John Bannister 229  
*Table Talk* (Coleridge), 54, 139  
*Tambara the Great* 78 157  
*Tarzan of the Apes* 65  
 Taylor Jeremy 275  
*Tears*, 178  
 Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 22; on  
   the word "nice," 52 53 111  
   161-162, 172, 179 180, 182  
   on Poetry 220 223 255 ono-  
   matopoeia in, 257 similes  
   in, 264, 268 271  
 Thackeray W. M., 73 76, 77  
   pathos in, 134  
 Thomas, Edward, 39  
*Three Men in a Boat*, 83 84, 119  
 Tolstoy Leo, 76, 89, 150-151 265  
*Tom Jones* 146, 152  
*Tono Bungay* 115  
*To Helen*, 223  
*To One in Paradise* 223  
*To the Lighthouse* 93  
*Tramp Abroad A*, 109  
 Translation, 189-191  
*Treatise of Fysikinge with an*  
   *Angle* 259  
*Tristram Shandy*, 23, 143 144  
 Trollope, A., 217 218  
*True Heart, The*, 94-95  
*Trumpton, Captain*, 71  
 Tulliver Tom, 210  
 Turner W. J., 271

## Literary Craftsmanship and Appreciation

- Ulalume*, 194  
*Ulysses*, 39  
*Under the Hill*, 272  
*Under the Knife*, 168  
*Urn-Burial*, see *Hydriotaphia*
- Vane*, Sybil, 161, 266  
 Van Gogh, Vincent, 133, 139, 191, 214, 215  
*Vanity Fair*, 76-77, 200  
*Vats, The*, 95  
*Venus, Mr*, 116-117  
 Verse, the writing of, 171-195  
 Villiers, George, 111-112, parodies Dryden, 193  
 Villon, F., 221  
*Virginitians, The*, 73  
*Virgin Widow, The*, 111
- Waller, Sir Richard, 201  
 Walpole, Horace, 122, on reading, 199  
 Walpole, Hugh, 87, 266  
*War and Peace*, 76, 150-151, 265  
*War Song of the Saracens*, 253  
 Warner, S T, 94-95  
*Warrington, Harry*, 73  
 Webb, Mary, 21, 84, 85, 86, 93, 96-97, 152, 266  
*Weller, Sam*, 52, 128, 150
- Weller, Tony*, 52, 71, 72, 78, 110, 127-128  
 Wells, H G, 34, 37, 46, 57, 79, short stories of, 139, 144, 150, 164, 168  
 West, Benjamin, 160  
 Wharton, Joseph, 50  
 Whistler, James McNeil, 42  
 Whitman, Walt, 227-228, 230  
*Widdershins*, 168  
*Wife of Bath, The*, 20  
 Wilde, Oscar, 16, 85, 97, 108, 118, dialogue of, 158, 159-160, 161, 184, similes in, 265-266  
 Wilder, Thornton, 82  
*William Wilson*, 155  
*Wintersmoon*, 87  
 Wit, 100-102  
 Woolf, Virginia, 93  
 Words, 48-58, associations of, 181-182, 241-242  
 Wordsworth, William, 33, 182, 213-214, 215, on Poetry, 221, 222
- Yeats, W B, 193, 217  
 Young, Edward, 268  
 Zoroaster, 25  
*Zuleika Dobson*, 101



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